TOPcast Episode #185:
What Do the Top 10 TOPcast Episodes Tell Us?

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

(*Musical Intro*)

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

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

Tom: I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast.

Hello, Kelvin. Happy May.

Kelvin: Happy May, and might I also say, “Happy anniversary?” That was all...

Tom: That's terrible.

Kelvin: I know. We were doing all those dad joke puns as a warm-up before hitting record. We now have, for those paying attention and keeping score, we now have 10 years of this podcast behind us in the rearview mirror. And with this episode, we've officially started Season 11. Happy anniversary.

Tom: Wow. Happy Anniversary. Yeah, too bad we're not together. We can't have cake, but we can share coffee over the miles.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: 10 years. Who'd have thunk when we started this…

Kelvin: Nope.

Tom: ...all those years ago that we would've done it for 10 years? Wow. Cool. All right, so you did hold up your mug.

Kelvin: Oh, I did. You'll appreciate this. This is my murder mystery on a train I solved the murder mug.

Tom: Love it. Yeah, as a mystery novelist, I love a good murder mystery.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. You've got a beverage there, Dr. Cavanagh?

Tom: I do actually. It's not thematic, but I'm in my UCF mug, and it is a San Francisco Bay Hazelnut.

Kelvin: Good. Good, good, good. Well, my coffee today from ye old TOPcast mug is a single-origin Guatemala light roast from right here in Louisville, Kentucky at Heine Brothers Coffee. And I was looking at the roaster's website, and this coffee is currently at the very top of the list of all the coffees they offer. No explanation was really given as to the ordering of the coffees, but I don't know, I thought maybe being at the top meant something.

So, my coffee's pretty good. I wonder if you can find the hint of a connection to today's topic in my mug.

Tom: Well, fortunately we're on video here with each other and I saw your hand gestures, and I'm going to say that the top, something with the top, which does feel like it could be related to what we're talking about today.

Kelvin: Yeah, I mean, that's kind of what I was going with. Longtime listeners know that I don't know, somewhere a few years in, whenever we started a new season, we tried to come up with a little gimmicky, shticky, pull-it-all-together, synergistic kind of a topic and title. So, as we kick off Season 11, we're going to talk about what do the top 10 TOPcast episodes tell us? What do the top 10 TOPcast episodes tell us? These are the top 10 episodes across our 10 years of TOPcast history.

Tom: Yeah, and there's nothing I like more than a little alliteration. So, you've got the top 10 TOPcast, tell us.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: Yeah. So, we've been through them, and you have actually taken a stab at discerning some themes that emerged. And maybe we start with just a little bit of history, a little recap because maybe not everybody's been with us since the very, very beginning. So, we started in May 2015, it feels like a million years ago now, and we were once-a-month for more than four years through December of 2019.

And then we were talking, I remember at the end of 2019, "We have actually some interviews we've done that we haven't had time to air, and we want to make sure we get to all of them. And so, what do you think about doing twice a month but the second one's an interview?" And we decided, "Yeah, let's start that in January of 2020…

Kelvin: [Heartily laughs]

Tom: …knowing that 2020 would be a nice, calm, normal year, nothing would happen to... Yeah, but I think it turned out to be a bit fortuitous.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Yeah, no, that's right. And so, since January of 2020, we have been two episodes a month, the first Monday and the third Monday, except for Labor Day. And during a good chunk of 2020, we even did, do you remember this, I didn't even write this down, we did what we started referring to as the field reports from [Strained reporter voice] “the front lines of the COVID resistance.”

Tom: [Chuckles]

Kelvin: It was like, "Okay, here's how we are struggling to deal with emergency ad hoc remote instruction and so forth." And from, I didn't write this down, but from basically, I want to say, mid-April, certainly May through toward the end of that year, like October, November, there's a good eight episodes that were framed that way.

Tom: Yeah, the field reports, I do remember that because it sort of felt like we were in a chaotic situation and all of us were hanging on by our fingertips and just trying to navigate this unprecedented thing. And there was, I think, across all of higher education, a real sense of we're in this together, there's no blueprint, and we're all trying to figure it out, and I know we'll get to that in a bit, but some people found TOPcast that way.

Kelvin: Yeah, seemingly. That does seem to be what the data tell us. I mean, just to, I guess, jump to that a little bit, during the height of the COVID era higher ed response, we absolutely saw our listens, downloads, accesses the highest of our entire 10-year portfolio of episodes. So, I think you're right. I mean, that's the conclusion I draw from those. Granted, we did sort of specialize on COVID response-themed episodes to a high degree. Certainly, well, not just 2020, I mean, in 2020, 2021, we were definitely of a mind. We were responding to new themes and so forth during that time.

Tom: Yeah, so I think you just said this, that eight of the top 10 were in that COVID era of our listens. And interestingly, only two were before that, 2018 and 2019. And people may not realize, the way we track our listens is through the long tail. So, we might look at... We'll look at initial listens on an episode after it's released within the first few weeks, and see how it does, and then we'll watch it over time. And then over time, people still go back and listen to the older episodes because of that long-tail effect. And you would think that the older episodes would have more listens just because they've been sitting out in the library a lot longer, but that's not the case. It's those COVID episodes that got the most listens.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, I hadn't said that yet, but I'll hit it again. So, of the top 10 most accessed episodes of the last 10 years, eight of them were in either 2020 or 2021, and then we have nothing in the top 10 from 2015, 2016, 2017, and we've had nothing in the top 10 since 2021 either. So, everything pre-COVID, 2018, through 2021. So, that's interesting.

I mean, unpack it a little bit further. I mean, I do appreciate this that the two pre-COVID episodes were two of those season kickoffs that we just talked about that were a little bit of a gimmicky, but nevertheless substantive and synergistic approach to distilling some of what we've learned about effective online teaching and online education, and they both have seemed to continue to resonate through the years with listeners over time. They seem to be broadly applicable.

Those are, if I'm not mistaken, “Six Deadly Sins of Online Teaching.” And we got a little bit of pushback on this title in retrospect, so I'm just going to acknowledge that as being a little bit ableist, but the inspired by the coffee, if I remember correctly, of the day in that episode, we were drinking a flavored coffee, Jamaica Me Crazy. We tied in the things that are really bothering us about the field of online education. So, those two were the pre-COVID episodes.

Tom: Yeah, interesting. And I guess you could say that some of those earlier episodes, we were still building the audience, and people hadn't heard of us yet, and we were trying to get out there and let people know we have a podcast, like everybody. [Chuckles] I guess everybody now has a podcast.

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: Back then, it wasn't quite so common. But even so, they're still out there, and they're not necessarily getting the listen, the new listens from the newer listens.

So anyway, that's just a little bit of a recap of some of the numbers, a little bit behind the scenes on how we monitor and track, and just see if we're talking about things that people want to listen to.

Kelvin: Yeah. And during that height of the COVID era, I mean, it is interesting to dig into those eight episodes a little bit. It seems like there's degrees of COVID relatedness. Right? I mean, we always have tried to be a bit evergreen and not just, I mean, every once in a while, we…

Tom: We have to talk about policies or something, yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, and it's like a right-now thing, but generally, generally. So, I mean, even the stuff that was very COVID-related, I think we tried to frame with a wider lens, but there are certainly things that are more COVID-related and less COVID-related that are still in that realm.

I think an example of the one that was probably the most bound to time is “Return to Campus Work. Or Not.” from August of 2021. That was #10 on the list, so that gives you a sense of it. But the themes were humanizing online education, and leading effectively, and figuring out the relationship between various digital course modalities. There's a certain timelessness to that, but there was a compelling need, intensity to those during that 2020 to 2021 timeframe.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah, interesting. So yeah, I think a lot of people were thrown into the, let's just mix metaphors here, thrown into the water and told to swim when it came to figuring out online and remote learning during COVID. But as we've said more than once, the waters reached their high-water mark, but they haven't necessarily receded all the way back. And I don't know, maybe that's true with the kinds of episodes that we've done or our listenership, but it does feel like it's dipping a little bit now, and maybe that's just a sign of the times that we don't have that acute emergency on our hands anymore.

Kelvin: Yeah. And I mean, we've talked about this recently. I mean, maybe it's also an indication that something about the online higher ed space broadly. We've talked about some

institutions aren't engaging with online education as a part of a values-aligned strategy. Some are stepping back, or some are just seeking to, I don't know how I really want to put this, sort of genericize all digital efforts. And so, maybe our field doesn't feel as field-like. Maybe that's a thing. No, that's old hat. Maybe that's a part of it. I don't really know for sure, but there's certainly something.

Tom: There are also more options, right?

Kelvin: Yes.

Tom: There are others you can listen to, and I'm sure people don't have more time than they used to have, so there are different choices that you have to listen. If you want to listen to something about online learning or higher education, there are a lot out there. And I think we're one of many, which may explain why some of our listenership may have declined a little bit recently. But who knows? We'd have to do a survey to find out for sure.

Kelvin: Which, I mean, let's pull that thread a little bit. I mean, you've put that out there. That is what we've noticed. Not just that the height of our listens was at its peak during that 2020-2021 thing, but also it's not just there was a spike, but there's actually been, for a while now, a bit of a decline.

It seems like we have a really loyal core listener base. When we've done listener surveys and so forth, we have so many folks who they say they've been listening from the beginning or multiple years or over a year. I think the last time we did one of those things, we didn't have anybody who had just started within the year, which is different than in years past. We would've had, "Oh, I've been listening for three months now, and I like it. I'm going to keep coming back." So, really loyal core, thank you. If you're part of that loyal core, we really appreciate it.

And we've done net promoter score. I mean, really folks, I mean, who listen, they're like, "Yeah, this is great. I recommend this," but it's not growing. And the net listens is decreasing, and the listener base, who listen at all, doesn't seem to be expanding. Those two things are a challenge with podcasts.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Now, having said that, we get emails from people who say, "Look, I'm a one-person shop on a small campus, doesn't have a ton of resources, but I have these things I have to accomplish, and I really appreciate TOPcast and how it's a community, and feels like professional development for me." And that's really gratifying. I've had people tell me that at conferences. And how many times have we been somewhere and someone's handed us a bag of coffee?

Kelvin: More than once. [Chuckles]

Tom: It's awesome.

Kelvin: That's right. [Chuckles]

Tom: Much more than once. A dozen times maybe I've had somebody hand me a bag of coffee.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] That's right.

Tom: We've had it shipped to the office with coffee, and our listeners are amazing, and people really, really, if they like it, they seem to like it a lot. It's just there's not a giant number of people in that category, but we really do appreciate the folks who have been listening and are listening. And even if you don't send us that email, or give us coffee, you certainly don't have to… [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Yeah. Oh, that's right. That's right.

Tom: ...but yeah, we really appreciate it. And I'm not sure how much we've said that over the 10 years, but it really does mean a lot to us. And I had someone at a conference just a couple of weeks ago lean over and tell me, I didn't know this person, I hadn't met them, but they recognized me and just tell me how much they appreciate the podcast, new to their job, and is going back through and listening to the whole library. And I was like, "That's awesome. Thank you for telling me that." Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, no, yeah, all of that. No, that's right. And it is though, maybe an inflection point for us.

Tom: That's a long pause. Am I supposed to fill it? [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Yeah, I was thinking maybe you'd fill it.

Tom: Yeah, well, no, it's true. So, Kelvin and I have been watching this for a while and have been having some preliminary conversations, and we've come to the conclusion that we would rather go out on top while we're awesome, if I say so myself…

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: …than slowly fade away and lose relevance. So, we've decided to do a TOPcast farewell tour. Yeah, you want to talk a little bit about the details of that?

Kelvin: Sure. I mean, rather than slow, slow, slow, slow, stop, we really thought that we would identify a finish line and…

Tom: Run through it.

Kelvin: Yeah. Sprint toward that finish line with kind of a renewed, I don't know, startup energy. So, with 10 years behind us, we didn't want to just stop. We like round numbers. We're completists, right?

So, we're going to have a shorter 11th season, and we're going to have our eye on the prize of Episode #200. You're listening to Episode #185. So, that means we've got after this one, another final 15 to get to 200. But as you've pointed out, Tom, you said, "Well, I mean, 15 scheduled episodes," which we can talk about that in a second, but so we're going to try to be one part nostalgia, retrospective, and one part push the envelope innovation, try to bring some energy to it. And there's probably going to be, we think, a

not-to-miss surprise or two in the mix, and we're going to try to run all the way to the finish line and beyond.

Tom: Yeah. So, we want to finish strong, and we're not going to lean away from any spicy topics or discussions about innovation, and anything else that crosses our path, as we have always talked about over the last 10 years.

But as Kelvin mentioned, we're calling this the final 15 scheduled episodes because even after maybe we turn the lights out after the 15th episode, Episode #200, don't maybe delete it from your feed. Maybe just keep it there because we're thinking that we might want issue some special episodes on occasion. Maybe there's something timely going on, or there's just something burning that we have to talk about. And we probably will put out some special unscheduled episodes that we don't know what the interval will be. It maybe depends on what strikes us. And if it turns out being often, then maybe we'll talk about coming back and doing this on some regular cadence, but yeah.

And I just wanted to dispel any rumors that may start. It's not because Kelvin and I aren't getting along. We're not even in the same time anymore.

Kelvin: [Laughter] No, that's true. And I guess, yeah, humans are funny, funny creatures. Hadn't occurred to me, really, but yeah, that's probably true. Yeah.

Tom: Probably. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: No, I mean, it's worth mentioning, right?

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: It's probably worth to put that out there. Yeah, I still like this. Probably keep going, but here's a little factoid. The former professional poker player, Annie Duke, wrote this book, *Quit: The Power of Knowing When to Walk Away*, and she observes…

Tom: I've read that book.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's a good book. Right?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: A recurring theme in that book is humans are notoriously bad at knowing when to stop something, slow something down, take on a new thing. We'll just persist. And so, we probably would, but we're looking at the data. And so, as Tom said earlier, we're going to go out strong, and that's all. We're still happy to do this on a... There's no Yoko.

Tom: [Laughs] You know, we have said so many times, probably on this podcast more than once, that higher ed is great at starting stuff and terrible at stopping stuff. How many majors linger on with two students in it, and how many…

Kelvin: Too many. [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. And how many projects and committees and task force? Things that just seem to go on and nobody ever steps back and says, "Can we stop this?" Because that's what Duke's book is about for *Quit*.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: It's like it's not about failure because too often in American culture, it's like, "If I quit, then I'm a failure." It's like, no, it's recognizing that in order to do this thing, I'm going to be more successful at, I have to stop doing this other thing. And I'm not saying this hasn't been successful, but it's about knowing that maybe to create space for us to do something else awesome; maybe it's time to wind this thing down.

So, who knows? But yeah, we're trying to model that…

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: ...the behavior in higher ed that we wish more people would have.

Kelvin: That's right. Let's quit more often. Quit early, quit often.

Tom: [Laughs]

Kelvin: A couple of things to reiterate. Please don't unsubscribe. Leave it there. I mean, gosh, I'm still subscribed to podcasts that have ended, and every once in a while I get surprised because it's like, "Whoa, they're back." You know?

Tom: Me, too. Yeah, me, too.

Kelvin: And I kind of like that. So, we wouldn't want a derive you of that, so stay subscribed. And we're still working out details, but we're working on plans for a grand finale in early January 2026. We'll likely skip the mid-December 2025 slot, do the top of December, and then go out on a bang with the top of January 2026.

We do plan to keep the full catalog of episodes online as a resource for current listeners who want to share a favorite episode, or those who come to the podcast as an archive. I've certainly come across my share of podcasts that way that they were ended before I began listening, and I've listened my way through belovedly.

Tom: Or cherry-picked episodes that interested me. I do that all the time, actually.

Kelvin: That's right. Do you want to say, though, a word or two about what comes next?

Tom: Do you mean upcoming things that we want people to be aware of?

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah.

Tom: Or something else? [Chuckles]

Kelvin: I mean, this TOPcast thing's going to be doing its final 15 sprint to the finish line deal with maybe some occasional podcasts afterwards, but we've got…

Tom: Other stuff. Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: ...we ourselves, and our teams, and we have stuff going on.

Tom: Absolutely.

Kelvin: So, what kind of things you want to talk about?

Tom: Yeah, so I'll do something, two things that are a little timely because they're both happening this month in May.

Kelvin: Ooh.

Tom: So, the first is UCF's Teaching & Learning with AI Conference. This'll be, I believe, the third year that we've done it, and it's grown. We are expecting somewhere between 800 and 1,000 people to attend. It's grown into, I think, the teaching and learning conference for thinking about how to really pedagogically use AI. It doesn't have to be online, but that's a component of it.

So, we encourage people to come, check it out. It's just a bunch of peers sharing best practices, research, what's worked for them, and having conversations about how are we going to all confront this new, disruptive technology of artificial intelligence?

So, that is May 28th in Orlando. It is at the DoubleTree hotel by Universal Studios. So, come in town, stay the weekend, go to the parks, bring the kids.

Kelvin: Go to Epic Universe.

Tom: Yeah, it's brand-new. I haven't been, but I hear it's amazing. Expect some lines probably because it's brand-new, but it's supposed to be state-of-the-art ride, themed experiences.

Kelvin: We'll throw a link to your conference in the show notes.

Tom: Yeah, I was just about to say, if you just Google, the URL is too long for me to say it right now, but if you just Google "UCF Teaching & Learning with AI," you'll find the page with registration dates, hotel, all the information on it.

And then the second one that I'll mention is that I have a new book coming out.

Kelvin: What?

Tom: And it's not even a crime novel. It is the *Chief Online Learning Officer's Guidebook: A Framework for Strategy and Practice in Higher Education* with my co-author Jocelyn Widmer, who has been on the podcast in the past, talking about some of these very same ideas that we have put into this book. It originated with her research and information-gathering from other COLOs around the country.

You contributed an essay to it, along with 54 other university presidents, sitting COLOs, CIOs, all kinds. I mean, the top people in the country, I think, have really contributed to this book. That comes out May 30th from Routledge. And I'm sorry, it's not cheap. Unfortunately, these books aren't cheap. I think the paperback is like $42, which is kind of expensive. If you're attending SOLAR though, they UPCEA SOLAR conference, you can get a discounted copy through the registration process, or if you're a sitting COLO, you can get a free copy.

But that's coming out. Hopefully, we'll actually be able to dive into a little more of the detail on that because I think there's a lot of stuff to mine in that book, a lot of insights, and so, check that one out.

Kelvin: Two other things that are less expensive and are not just time limited that I'll mention. One is from the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning is a relatively new podcast called "AI Ate My Homework," which is... I like it a lot. One of my colleagues here, Jason Zahrndt, hosts a sit-down with one instructor in each episode, and they pull out a learning assignment that has existed prior to AI, and then they look at how did AI intersect with that? Was it completable by generative AI? And what insights for the instructor does that inspire? What changes might you make to the assignment? What expectations might you frame differently for learners? I like it a lot. "AI Ate My Homework."

Tom: I love the concept. "AI Ate My Homework," that sounds fantastic. And I love the title. I love the concept. And it's a great compliment, actually, to the Teaching & Learning With AI Conference.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, wherever fine podcasts are found, look for that, "AI Ate My Homework."

And then I launched just recently what I frame as not exactly, not quite a newsletter, I'm calling *The Lift. The Lift* – insights and inspiration for the work of academic innovation, digital learning, and leading. And it's on the LinkedIn newsletter platform. You don't have to be on LinkedIn to read, but if you want to interact, make comments, that sort of thing, then you'll need to authenticate.

And there's even an audio edition. If you really are not a reader, you're really a listener, there's an audio edition as well. And you can find that using the URL shortening service Dub at dub.sh/thelift, dub.sh/thelift, lowercase. So, we'll talk more about these things.

Tom: Let me just put an unsolicited endorsement for *The Lift*. I've read the first episode that you put or issue that you put out and yeah, I think it's great. Everybody should check it out.

Kelvin: Well, thank you for that. I appreciate it. I know this is a bittersweet episode, right? It's a transitional point. I mean, I'm kind of conflicted about it.

Tom: Me, too.

Kelvin: But I think it's a good thing to own a decision, to sunset something, and as you said, Tom, go out on our own terms, and positively and strongly, and bringing a renewed energy to this final 15 scheduled episodes up through Episode #200. So, tell your friends and

colleagues, join in. We're going to try to do some special stuff. There's a happy element to owning that, and then there's a sad to see something end. That's conflictual.

Tom: It's like somebody leaving a job after 24 years of working somewhere. [Chuckles] But it's sad, but also exciting for the new opportunities that lay ahead.

Kelvin: It's a lot like that.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yes, it's a lot like that. Shall I try to put this plane on the runway?

Tom: Yeah. Put a ribbon on this plane, will ya?

Kelvin: [Chuckles] So, we see the finish line on the horizon, but we are still running. Please grab your sneakers and keep pace with us both in our important daily work of serving students with innovative digital education, and for the final 15 scheduled episodes of TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. How about that?

(*Musical Outro*)

Tom: Yeah. All right. It's a big episode. Big announcement. Tell your friends. They don't want to miss the final 15 as we wrap things up.

All right, but we have 15 more to go. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.