TOPcast Episode #187:
The TOPcast "Core Audience" and Strategic Online Education

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.

(*Musical Intro*)

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

Tom Cavanagh: 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 to the final 15 episodes of TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast.

Tom: [Chuckles] Final 15 *scheduled* episodes. I'll be that guy...

Kelvin: That's right. You do that.

Tom: That adds that parenthetical. But yeah. So, here we are, final 15. And as we get ready to kick off, I know we've talked about this off air, but I just want to offer a word of thanks to all the people that either reached out to us directly, I got a text or two, honestly, and then some folks publicly on LinkedIn and social… saying how much they appreciated the show, and what it's meant for them professionally. And it was really touching. I really appreciated it.

Kelvin: Yeah. I'm with you. I mean, a couple of those, I was like... I mean really kind of... It was like one of those, "I got to sit down for a second," kind of staggered by the very kind, kind of things. And maybe we should talk about those at some point, but yes, thank you. We've talked about this before, this podcasting thing, it's... I mean, it's not completely, but it's a little bit you're speaking into the void, and you're just picking up on dribs and drabs of evidence that possibly somebody somewhere might be listening, but you don't really know and occasionally somebody hands you a bag of coffee.

Tom: "Is anybody out there?"

Kelvin: But then, I mean, for folks to say, "Hey. This has been really meaningful," or you're like, "Oh, I didn't know you listened, but it's great." [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. Agreed. It was really touching, and we appreciate it, and it meant a lot to us and, yeah, that's why we do it. But I also got some private note along the lines of... It was a brave decision of us to know when maybe the time was right to step away and so that you could devote your time to other things and that... Mean, we talked about this. It was not an easy decision. It was hard. We like doing this. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Yeah. That's right. And as you've said, and I think this is right. Hey, who knows? I mean, maybe we'll be the people that retire, and then show up for work every day.

Tom: [Chuckles]

Kelvin: I don't know. I hope not. But maybe... We've talked about dropping into the feed when appropriate, or we feel a compelling reason to do so. And so, maybe it won't be like gone for forever ever, but not too much the scheduled kind of thing.

Tom: Yeah. Agreed. All right. So, I have a cup of Joe. I presume you have a cup of Joe, Kelvin. I don't know if you have a thermos, but what's in the cup?

Kelvin: I have no thermos. I have a cup. I actually ran down the street, went through a drive-through. So, what's in your cup? That's a fancy cup.

Tom: It is a fancy cup. This is my Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Association of Chief Academic Officers Digital Fellows program, which I didn't start, but I finished when our provost became president. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: I remember.

Tom: He said, "Tom, you're up."

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And so, I sat around with a bunch of provosts pretending like I belonged. It was fun.

Kelvin: You got a coffee mug.

Tom: I got a coffee mug, and I learned a lot. It was a great experience. I loved it. Our friend Casey was the one who was facilitating that.

Kelvin: Casey Green. Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. So, it is a cup of Green Mountain Coffee, half-caf.

Kelvin: Oh, I got you. First, I thought it was kind of Grinchy because I thought it was going to be green coffee, and I've wondered how long it had been sitting out, but no. Okay. Green Mountain, I got you.

Tom: No. Yeah. And I've had that before on this podcast. And it's not…

Kelvin: Old coffee?

Tom: [Laughs] No, but... Same kind. Same mixture of grounds. [Laughs]

Kelvin: Okay. Now I'm picturing you digging up some green earth and sticking... I get distracted. I probably shouldn't. You want to know what's in my cup?

Tom: I would. Yeah. Let's move on. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Before the end of the show? [Chuckles] Yeah. So, the coffee in my cup today, Tom, is the house blend from local roaster and café, Heine Brothers, here in Louisville. It is a combination of three Central American coffees, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras. And they come together to make this signature coffee honoring the 30+ year history of this local café, and wrapped up in that I thought was a little bit of resonance with perhaps the topic du jour.

Tom: Yeah, I get it. I think I get it. I think it works on two levels.

Kelvin: Ooh.

Tom: So, on one level, you've got three things mixed into one.

Kelvin: Yep. Yep, yep, yep. [Sips coffee]

Tom: So, in that regard, it's a little similar to mine where I got caf and no caf mixed into one. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Oh, yeah. Sure. That's right. Yeah.

Tom: And so that's three things under one umbrella, sort of.

Kelvin: Yep. Yep, yep, yep.

Tom: So, I think that's relevant. And then the other is honoring a 30-year history, but... Maybe not 30 years, but a 10-year history perhaps.

Kelvin: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Tom: So, am I on the right track?

Kelvin: Ding, ding, ding. That's exactly what I was thinking of. So, you want to tell people what we're talking about today?

Tom: Yeah. So, as we're continuing on our journey through the final 15 scheduled episodes, we'd like to say a word about and to our core audience because we've had what we call the tripartite audience of online faculty, instructional designers, and administrative leaders over the years. And we've tried to serve all three aspects of that audience base. We know that not everyone who listens kind of fits neatly into one of those categories. Maybe you're a faculty administrator, or something, or an instructional designer, faculty member. Take your pick. And we know that some listeners have these multiple roles. But as we head toward our final Episode #200 towards the end of the year, I think it's appropriate to say something about and to this three-strand audience that we have.

Kelvin: Yeah. No. That's right. And we'll maybe comment on this a little bit further, but I sometimes think... I don't know how you think about this, Tom. I sometimes say three strand, like it's braided. But I sometimes think of a continuum, like a number line, and I think of these being three clothespins on the line and there's some in-between stuff. And there's other roles that aren't neatly in one of those three. And then of course, there's the one person who ticks off all three boxes, or whatever, like you said.

And I don't know if you'll allow this digression for a second, but I was thinking about this. I don't know if this is true or not, so keep me honest, but back when we started, I don't know if we saw all three elements of this audience neatly in view. I think we discovered it along the way. I think people started talking to us about the podcast and, "Oh, what do you..." and, "I'm an instructional designer. I lead blah, blah, blah. I'm a faculty member," or, "I'm in between." And we kept hearing from those three groupings more than others, but we've heard from other people who have other roles. Does that ring true for you?

Tom: Yeah. I think that's true. I mean, we didn't have some grand plan, and we wrote out our strategic vision of audience. It wasn't like that at all.

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: It was... I mean, if you recall. I know you do. We were looking for a podcast like this, and we couldn't find it. And so, we said, "Well, maybe we should do it." And it was sort of for us. And I think that if you drew a Venn diagram of those three things, we both live in the middle of it. And so, it kind of makes sense that we're serving those different constituencies, those stakeholders. But yeah, it wasn't explicit from the beginning. It sort of evolved as we went along.

Kelvin: Yeah. And so, as we say something... We'll say some stuff about and to both this core audience and more, but first, maybe we'll just say this. Thank you. Thank you if you've been listening. We appreciate it. No matter what your role is, thank you for that. And I don't know if you agree with this, Tom, but I've been pondering this lately, and it's possible that even after all these years, these three core groups still might not fully understand, and relate to, and appreciate each other as well as they might. But I'm going to say each group needs the others, and students need and benefit from the work of all three.

Tom: Amen. I agree with that. Preach.

Kelvin: Yeah. And then maybe I'll say this, and then I'll shut up and we have a conversation. As I said before we hit “Record,” I was thinking about this and we named this thing, right? “TOPcast, the Teaching Online podcast.” And I think implicit in that is we may not have had this three-strand audience in mind, but I think we had this conceptualization in mind, this core conceptualization, of what we might call the teaching and learning affordances of online and digital education as a strategic initiative. I think that was the core thing that we were always speaking from and to.

There's other stuff though that's not like the teaching and learning affordances of online and digital education. And we've certainly talked about recently. We had Sasha Thackaberry-Voinovich on, and we talk about marketing and enrollment management and all manner of other aspects. But this is the core thing. So, I think we've centered on optimizing course design and teaching as a strategy, as of the center of the bullseye, which I think is how we got to this tripartite core audience. And I think that's just worth acknowledging, if you think it's true. If you don't think it's true, we can edit that part out.

Tom: There's somebody listening right now saying, "I'm not that. I'm an advisor."

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Yeah. But we love you anyway, and you're welcome. But when we look at the big broad categories, they do seem to fall into those three areas of administrators, instructional designers, and faculty.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, do we want to talk about some of the things we've learned about the interrelationship between those three?

Tom: Yeah. Yeah. So, why don't you start? What's on your mind, Dr. Thompson?

Kelvin: Well, one, I mean, I'll start with something like “da basic.” I think arguably, probably in decreasing order, these roles exist at institutions of higher education, thusly. I think most institutions have more online faculty than they have instructional designers, and they have more instructional designers than they have

administrative leaders. I think that's a thing. And maybe... I've been pondering this. I don't want to open up a can of worms. But as you say, we each have lived at the intersection of these roles, but I think sometimes we tilt a little, maybe understandably, online administrative leader. And I think there's fewer online administrative leaders than there are online faculty. And so, we've tried to emphasize something that appeals to all and even specializes in each one periodically, but the more that we tilt toward administrative leaders, maybe not everybody can relate to that. So, maybe that's some of our decline. So, I don't know.

Tom: Yeah. The smaller the audience, the more we talk about that. Yeah. That's probably true. And peeling back the curtain a little bit on how we come up with topics, often you, and I'll just look at each other and say, "What's dominating your time lately?" And that feels like it's probably something in the zeitgeist that we should talk about because it's something that's bubbling up, whether it's budgets, or policies, or whatever the case might be. And those tend to skew administrative because we happen to sit in those roles. But we have been intentional about trying to address these other audiences. And I think we've done a pretty good job, but as we'll get into in a minute, I think that the numbers of... We've done more episodes on leadership and administration probably than we have on pedagogical practice in online courses. And maybe that's just a function of who we are and the jobs that we currently sit in.

Kelvin: I think that's right. Although, I will put this on the table, not to argue with myself. [Both chuckle] I think that we care about, and we have tried to foster through this podcast a caring about strategic implementations of online and digital education. And while, yes, that's sort of the purview of the administrative leader, I think we've tried to frame this as not only the purview of the administrative leader, that we really want to foster everybody, no matter where they touch the elephant, everybody thinking strategically. But I think that does tilt us. Maybe not everybody wants to hear something about strategic. Just like, "Can you just tell me the six things I need to do when I'm teaching this class?" I mean, maybe that's it. I don't know if that's a thing or not, but...

Tom: Yeah. And occasionally I've been surprised about the ones that have been popular have been the ones that tend to maybe skew towards that larger audience of faculty. The one that always comes to mind is my colleague, your former colleague, here at UCF, Dr. Richard Zraick, during the pandemic. Talked about how to properly use and save your voice when you're teaching online and having meetings all day online. Turned out to be a really high-listened episode.

Kelvin: Yeah. That's true. No. It was sort of a unique angle. right? [Laughs]

Tom: It was. Yeah. I remember him pitching it to us and we looked at it going, "Okay. We'll give it a shot. Yeah."

Kelvin: "Sure. Okay. Yeah."

Tom: Turned out that was something people were interested in. Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah. And maybe, moving that forward a little bit, here's another truism, I think, online faculty are on the front line of making online and digital learning happen. And again, thank you. Thank you for doing that. But online faculty are not alone in this pursuit. Even if you don't have a lot of support at your individual institution, there's a whole field of colleagues' other places. There's research and professional practice literature. Even if you feel like you're alone in a dark room, you're not. I mean, we've been here and there's others.

Tom: Yeah. Training you can get. You can just go buy it from a professional organization. UPCEA, OLC, they both have training in this area, and others do as well. So, we offer something at UCF that you can just go buy into. So, there are resources out there that you can avail yourself of. And I would imagine, even if you're at a school that maybe doesn't have the kind of infrastructure that you or I might have right now, there's somebody there who's in charge of supporting online learning. And that person would love to help you. Just ask them. They may not have a ton of bandwidth, but they're going to do everything in their power to help you be successful. If you're a faculty member listening to this, and you sort of feel like an orphan a little bit, find the person who's in charge of online learning, the director of online learning, whoever it is on your campus. That person is there to support you, and they want to help you.

Kelvin: And if your institution's fortunate enough to have somebody who specializes in instructional design for online, blended, digital education, such a person would be the first one to raise their hand and offer to help. But instructional designers are equipped to disseminate effective course design and teaching practices at scale in a way that is learner-centric, in a way that benefits today's learners.

Tom: Yeah. And they are probably... I always say they're the sharp end of the spear and supporting those faculty that we just talked about. The faculty are the disciplinary experts. They may be expert teachers. They may know exactly how to engage a student in a classroom. But typically, the instructional designer is the one who can help them translate that expertise, that knowledge, to a digital-first environment. That it's not always intuitive. You may not always realize what's available to you, what's good practice, maybe a different way of accomplishing your objectives. You have the whole internet at your disposal instead of what's bounded in your classroom potentially. And the instructional designers are a partner in that journey.

Kelvin: Yeah. And I think at this point in our shared higher ed developmental history, maybe that's counterintuitive because maybe that was okay in the early 2000s or the teens or something, but now post-COVID, well, I know where the "Record" button is. [Laughs] I know... I mean, I've been doing this for a few years. Yes.

Thank you. Great. Appreciate it. Wonderful. And yet, one, maybe I'll say there's always room for improvement, but there's, at this point, three decades plus, depending on what literature you want to draw upon, of research and professional practice, literature codified. There's always room for improvement. There's stuff that we can get better about. And instructional designers, they know stuff about that.

Tom: Right. They are professionals, many of them with national reputations and doctorates in the space. And they're as much of a scholar of their field as the chemistry professor is in his or hers. Shall I say a word about administrative leaders?

Kelvin: Please.

Tom: So, they're the ones who are kind of focused on the holistic system benefits that potential learners and those big supports at the institutional level, looking at the institutional mission. And obviously, it's what I relate to over the last few years. That's sort of been my role. And they're the ones that hopefully provide the infrastructure, the resources, the vision that support the instructional designers and the faculty to ultimately teach students.

Kelvin: Yeah. Marshaling resources. I think about synergies. I think about not just pieces and parts, but this whole. Yeah. Exactly. Alignment. I think all that's right. And maybe to say each of those roles, online faculty, instructional designer, administrative leader, each of those roles is crucial for the successful implementation of strategic online or digital education. And I don't know. I've been thinking about this some lately, Tom. I think we need to be... I think this is a general truism across many aspects of life, but it's true here, too, with these roles. We need to be careful not to, shall we say, “us and them” each other as we collectively seek to serve students well together. It's not, "Well, you instructional designers…" or, "Those faculty…" or, "Whatever bureaucrat decided this," or any kind of phrasing like that. No. We're all in this together. We're trying to be centered on serving our students well.

Tom: Yeah. I agree. We're all on the same team. Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah. You talked about in passing, okay, there's our core audience, but there's others as well. Shall we acknowledge some of these other folks? [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. Absolutely. So, I threw out advisors just sort of off the top of my head, but we know that we have other folks who listen to the podcast, librarians, student success folks, like coaches, marketing enrollment professionals, various instructional technologists, like LMS admin folks, and others. Right?

Kelvin: Mm-hmm (Affirmative).

Tom: And we appreciate them and recognize they're part of the team, too. [Chuckles] We're all on the same team, and everybody's on the bus hopefully going in the same direction.

Kelvin: Yeah. And despite what we said about the teaching and learning affordances at the core, we couldn't really, truly pull off strategic online and/or digital education without everybody's expertise, the people, that... The roles that you mentioned, Tom, and others. And we value all those roles. And we might not have always said, "Well, our three-strand audience," they might not have gotten wrapped up in that, but we have had specific episodes that have touched on some of the functions that you've just talked about. We've not done, that I can recall, a good episode about the role of librarians.

Tom: I was just thinking that. Yeah.

Kelvin: Maybe there's an opportunity still. I don't know. [Chuckles]

Tom: Maybe. Let's see what we have on the calendar and what openings we have in our last episodes. But yeah.

Kelvin: But we have talked about some of the other things.

Tom: Yeah. Absolutely. Well, you sort of touched on that a little bit by saying what we haven't done, but I know you've gone through and identified a couple of examples of how we have addressed these three different audiences. You want to maybe highlight those?

Kelvin: Sure. Okay. You talked about, Tom, like the pro tips for vocal care. I think a couple of other episodes that come to my mind that are very quintessentially online faculty oriented, not limited to, but that really kind of elevate that role, one is Episode #37, “6 Deadly Sins of Online Teaching,” one of our more popular episodes, and Episode #99, which is about faculty voice, not in the vocal care sense, but hearing from faculty voice and valuing we said. It's in that title. Those are two of... There's others, but those are two that came to my mind that said something about crystallizing the expertise and experience of online faculty.

Tom: Cool. Yeah. What about instructional designers?

Kelvin: Two that came to my mind, but you might have others, one, we had this really unique episode that turned out to be Episode #105 from one of our friends of TOPcast and TOPcast listeners that had a sort of an embedded pre-recorded bit, which we just sort of did a wraparound around. But we called that episode “How Roasted is Your Course?” And it's really about the foodie thing, the more cooked the food is, the more you're tasting the experience of the chef as opposed to the experience of the farmer. And in a similar vein, the more roasted, the more you're tasting the roaster's work. The less roasted than the coffee beans are, the more

you're tasting then the work of the farmer. And that is a metaphor for the work of an instructional designer. And I thought it was really nice. That was a key one, I think.

Tom: Yeah. That was a good one. I remember that one.

Kelvin: And then there's also "(More) Equitable Outcomes through Instructional Design," which was another good one, Episode #122. "How Roasted is Your Course?" was Episode #105. You got any favorites from the administrative leader standpoint?

Tom: There's one I'll throw out. It was an article that you and I co-authored, and it was also... We did the presentation, I want to say at least once or twice. It was Keeping FIRRST Things First (Episode #25), with an extra R in there.

Kelvin: FIRRST. FIRRST. (Using European lilt) [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. FIRRST. And I still use that framework today when I'm sometimes talking about things. And I found that a useful heuristic.

Kelvin: Yeah. Right. And it was sort of this overarching strategy, you're trying to get somewhere, kind of vision kind of thing. Yeah. And a more recent one that I think got some attention, it seems like in the more recent data, even though recent-ish, is Episode #167. It's not even super-duper core, but it's supporting. "Cultivating a Startup Mindset." That seemed to be well received. And I enjoy that kind of stuff anyway. Just fostering an organizational culture that leads toward innovation I think is good.

Tom: Yeah. I agree. I like that one, too. It was sort of on my mind, too, because it's included in the book that I have coming out shortly. And so, it was very top of mind when we recorded that one.

Kelvin: And I guess we should say, I mean, while those are examples that maybe emphasize a particular part of our core audience, it's not just for each of those. We've really tried to... Even on the emphasis things, there's something there for everybody, I like to think. And those things all exist in the library. Hope folks will... Once we're done with this thing, they'll still consult the library of recordings and find some value there.

Tom: I think a lot of what we have in the library is evergreen. And so hopefully, it'll still have some use for somebody through the magic of the long tail. So, should I try and put a bow on it here?

Kelvin: Please do. Please do.

Tom: All right, Kelvin. Strategic student-serving digital education doesn't just happen, nor is it merely a hobbyist happenstance. You know how much I love alliteration?

Kelvin: I do.

Tom: Pursued as a passion project. There are specialized knowledge bases drawn upon by people in unique roles that combine to make up a field or a discipline. We need to continue to work to understand each other and synergistically depend upon one another all on the same team if we are to successfully serve an increasingly varied set of modern learners.

Kelvin: Yeah. That. That. Yes.

Tom: [Chuckles] Cool.

Kelvin: For 10 years, that's what we've been trying to work on. [Chuckles]

Tom: Yeah. Weren't you people paying attention? [Chuckles]

Kelvin: [Laughs] That was good. So, we hope that we've disentangled a little bit of the three-strand audience and given appropriate shout-out, inadequate, and belatedly as it might've been, to a more varied set of audiences. But this is the work. This is what we're trying to call out. So, it's been good.

(*Musical Outro*)

Kelvin: All the last 10 years has been fun, Tom. But this episode's been fun and sharing the coffee and sharing the conversation about our three-strand audience plus has been good. So, thanks for both. And I guess I'll say until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.