

TOPcast Episode #199: Pillar Panel #3: Faculty Professional Development in Online Ed

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(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 am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to the final 15 episodes of TOPcast, The Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin: Well, I mean two things, not exactly wrong with that, but that I will tweak a little bit. One, as you like to say, Dr. Cavanagh, the final 15 *scheduled* episodes, that's thing number one. Thing number two, there's really only one episode left after this one that will release at the beginning of January 2026, so we're down into the final two now.

Tom: And then there was one... Yes, and you're right, final 15 scheduled because we were asking people keep the feed open, stay subscribed, because you never know when we're going to want to opine on something and pop back into your feed and have something to say because we cannot resist.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Tom: So, Kelvin, I saw you there with your beverage as I have been wanting to say what's in the thermos?

Kelvin: Well, in my brand new first use Disney gingerbread extravaganza construction mug is a tasty concoction. It is a practically dessert. It is a...

Tom: What kind of coffee?

Kelvin: It's a Mayan... No, it's not... Well, it's almost, it's my attempt at a Mayan mocha. I said to the café downstairs, "I'd like a caffè mocha, but can you spice it up a little bit?" And they're like, "I don't know. I guess we'll see what we can find. We'll put something in there." So, it's like dessert with a kick.

Tom: They had no idea who they were talking to when it comes to coffee.

Kelvin: They just don't have any idea who they're talking to. They're like, "Next." [Chuckles] So, it's pretty tasty. And I thought this mug was... It's the end of 2025. We're getting to the holiday season, that was appropriate. But can you find a connection to today's topic?

Tom: Well, I don't know. I don't know. You know how I am. I can never...

Kelvin: I do know how you are.

Tom: Unless it's right on the nose because I'm a simple man, Kelvin.

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: I don't know if I can always get these connections, but it is two things in one, and we have two guests today in one episode. That's the level of complexity at which I operate.

Kelvin: I mean, that's not wrong.

Tom: All right. Hey! [Chuckles]

Kelvin: None of that's wrong. I mean, no, I think of Jackie Gleason. I think of, "Oh, well, sweet, it is." It's like dessert. We have just the best, tastiest episode ever coming up right here. It is all the things, and this probably going to get a little spicy in here, too. So, that was my attempt at a connection, Tom.

Tom: All right. Yeah, that sounds good. Well, it sounds like you're enjoying it. I'm going with... It's afternoon, I'm trying to stay hydrated, so I have my deconstructed clear coffee at the moment.

Kelvin: Water.

Tom: Shh. Yes. That's what I'm telling everybody anyway.

Kelvin: That's what you're telling everybody. Yeah.

Tom: [Clears throat] So, you want to set up this third and final Pillar Panel and maybe our listeners will make their own connection?

Kelvin: As they are want to do.

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: Yes. Well, for the uninitiated, a part of our sprint to the finish line as we get closer to the TOPcast finale of Episode #200 only, as we say, only one episode left after this one, we have been doing a three-part mini-series, and today's episode is that final of those three top of the month episodes that feature a mini-panel of notable community members speaking with us about key topics that we've kind of called structural pillars in our online and digital education work. So, we've been calling this whole thing our Pillar Panel miniseries because we couldn't come up with anything better than that. Today's Pillar Panel topic is faculty professional development for effective online or digital course design and teaching, and we might just call that faculty professional development for short. How's that?

Tom: Yes, that is what we're doing. And so, we're wrapping up our little trilogy today of this miniseries, and I can't think of two better people to talk about this subject with.

Kelvin: Mm-hmm.

Tom: So, we have two guests with us today live to discuss faculty professional development, Dr. Michelle Pacansky-Brock, and Dr. Alejandra, "Alex," Pickett, both good friends of ours and the podcast. So, I'm going to do a little brief intro. Welcome, ladies. Dr. Michelle Pacansky-Brock currently works as a visiting expert in professional development and AI for the Foundation for California Community Colleges. She has long been a trusted voice in humanizing and elevating online teaching that makes a difference. She has been an educational developer, author, speaker, and award-winning teacher in various higher ed contexts. Over the decades, her work has consistently examined the intersection of relationships, technology, and learning. Dr. Pacansky-Brock has a passion for creating new structures within complex systems. Welcome, Michelle. You want to introduce Alex?

Kelvin: Sure thing. Dr. Alejandra, "Alex," Pickett is currently the director of online teaching for SUNY Online within the State University of New York, known to its friends and neighbors as SUNY. She gives leadership and direction to the SUNY Online Teaching unit and has led SUNY's online faculty development and instructional design efforts since, get this, 1994 working with the 64 SUNY institutions. She has directly supported or coordinated the development of 300-plus online instructional designers

and more than 6,000 online faculty and their online courses. As you say, we couldn't have found better people to come be in this episode, Tom. Both of our guests...

Tom: I can't believe that Alex started at SUNY at 10 years old back in 1994. Yeah.

Kelvin: [Snorts] Now, you're just kissing up. Yeah.

Tom: [Guffaws] It does not seem that long ago to me, either. So welcome, welcome ladies.

Kelvin: You probably remember the 20th century, Tom.

Tom: Barely, but yes...

Kelvin: Not like us hip new 21st century kids.

Tom: That's right. Yeah.

Kelvin: I should note that both of our guests are prolific as writers and speakers and in service to our broader higher ed community through various professional associations. Both we should note our returning guests with prior TOPcast episodes available in our catalog. Check out the show notes for this episode, and you can get a direct link to those. And as Tom says, again, welcome both of you.

Tom: Yeah, thank you both for being on the show. We really do appreciate it. So, we do build this show as a collegial conversation over a shared cup of coffee about online and blended and digital learning in a conversation among colleagues, which you both are. So, with apologies to our friends and colleagues over at the Tea for Teaching Podcast, Rebecca Mushtare and John Kane. Do either or both of you have a beverage in front of you, some drink of choice that you would like to maybe share?

Michelle Pacansky-Brock: I'm with you, Tom.

Tom: [Laughs] Thank you, Michelle.

Michelle: I've got my water. I had back-to-back Zooms, but it's serving a purpose. [Chuckles]

Tom: It's good to stay hydrated.

Alejandra “Alex” Pickett: And I'm drinking a lovely Colombian coffee with half-and-half, and it's my favorite. I love a medium roast is usually what I like, and I love Colombian coffee as a recognition of my roots.

Tom: [Chuckles] Awesome. Yeah. Well, so we have two coffees and two waters that... How symmetrical of us.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Yeah, that's right. Well, we'll jump right into it. In these special farewell episodes, we are addressing three topics core to successful online and digital education: Leadership vision, faculty professional development, and research and evidence-driven practice. So, our first springboard question for our two guests is how do you see these topics as interrelated? That is, in what ways are these three topics all pillars for our work of strategic online or digital education? Maybe Michelle, why don't we start with you and then head over to Alex, and if there's any time left for Tom and I to say anything of substance, maybe we'll go Tom and then me, Michelle.

Michelle: Sure. Thanks, Kelvin. First of all, I was thinking about the three pillars and thinking about this question and a different visual came to mind, and I don't know if it'll resonate, but it made me think of a gemstone with different facets on the surface, and how when you look at a gemstone, you may just see one facet, but it doesn't mean that the others aren't there. And so, at different times, I think different facets emerge and the others are still there as an integral component of the whole. So, it made me think a little bit differently about it, but to tie this into a specific example, I recently had the opportunity to lead a large-scale humanizing online STEM grant across two public systems of higher education in California. When I went about doing that with our project team, this was a faculty development, right? So, faculty professional development effort to awaken an awareness in more STEM faculty about the value of instructor and student relationships, particularly how it relates to culturally diverse students.

And so, the program itself that we designed, the asynchronous facilitated online course that faculty took was very much rooted in research and evidence-driven practices. However, that research and evidence was for online. So, we adapted it for the asynchronous environment. And so, that's an example of how those two interrelate. The other facet or pillar though is leadership vision. And we did a really great job in my opinion with those first two. And we also had research that came out of that project that demonstrated its impact on student success, and belonging, and also changing faculty mindsets. The leadership vision piece was if we had been more successful with integrating that into the leadership vision of institutions, then perhaps it would've been more formally adopted, more widely. That was a lot harder. And I think maybe I'll probably unpack that more in some of my other responses today. But I think ideally those three

things go together for things to scale. And I think that vision can also be... Well, I know that vision can be very impacted by resources, and that's usually the bottom line for a lot of the work that we're talking about today.

Kelvin: Thanks for that, Michelle. Alex, what do you think, how do you see these three facets or pillars as being interrelated?

Alex: I love the metaphor, Michelle, of the gemstone. That's wonderful. When I was, and I'm going to think about that as I say whatever I want to say here, but I've always viewed these pillars as a single ecosystem, and that's with hindsight, right? At SUNY, our history shows that online teaching at scale really only works when leadership, vision, faculty development and research are tightly aligned, and integrated, and mutually reinforcing. Leadership, I think your vision and your objectives, set the direction and create the conditions that are necessary for success. In the early SLN years at SUNY, I think our vision was clear. We were one of the original Sloan-C grantees very early on in 1994, that's when I started when I was 10... [Chuckles]

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Alex: ...and ended up as the first online instructional designer at SUNY back in 1994 when we started. We had a whole year of faculty development with six faculty, one year to work with them.

And our focus was on thinking about what this thing was with online learning. Was it actually a thing? Was it possible? [Chuckles] And we were really focused on quality. How do we do this in a way that results in learning? And the context was... 1994 before there was a graphical interface to the internet, so our context really defined what we were doing. So, we focused on quality, we wanted things to be faculty-driven, and we were focused on being learner-centered. And I mean, that's our context.

That particular facet of leadership and vision was really focused on pedagogy and on faculty development. And of course we had this grant, right? So, that gem facet of pedagogy, course design, and faculty development to me is the engine, now looking backwards is the engine that drives the vision. And I think we learned really early on that online teaching required design, while it's both pedagogical and technical, we prioritize the pedagogy and the role of the online instructional designer very early on. Our context and the individuals that were involved, meaning me [Chuckles], really drove that approach. And so, I think evidence-based guidelines were necessary to ensure that we were being systematic and consistent and being able to have those results across large numbers of SUNY campuses. There's 64 SUNY campuses, and we over

the years have worked with almost all of them, large numbers of faculty, large numbers of courses.

We doubled in size every semester really. And initially all of that resulted in the professionalized role of the online instructional designer, which wasn't a thing back in 1994. There was no such thing. There wasn't even an LMS, or like I said, graphical interface to the internet. So, we understood very early on that online course design requires time. We measured that across all of our faculty. It was average of 120 hours of time. And that it's not intuitive to develop the pedagogical and technical knowledge and skills that are necessary, and that it requires intentionality, transparency, alignment in things, and on awareness, primarily an awareness of the online learner experience.

And as you mentioned in Episode #165, Kelvin... [Chuckles] I can't remember, I remembered that. [Chuckles] You said something like faculty were taught to be scholars, not teachers. And how online exposes the invisible and makes the implicit explicit, it's not ephemeral. In other words, like in a face-to-face classroom, there are artifacts that can be looked at, reviewed, studied actually, analyzed. And all of that has helped us to understand and develop our understanding of how people can teach and learn well online. I think over time, the SUNY Faculty Development Program resulted in a community of practice of faculty and instructional designers who weren't just trained and compliant, but they were excited and empowered to join a community of online teaching practitioners who were interested... or I tried to cultivate that, that they become interested in continuously improving their online course designs and sharing what they learned with others. The research piece, the other pillar and facet... So, those two pieces, faculty development and research to me were the facets that we, I think focused on and did really well. The leadership piece and the financial models honestly came much later thinking about it anyway.

And so, I think the research piece is what keeps the whole ecosystem focused on what works. And I think you can have all of those things: goals, and vision, and resources, but without theory, and without the research underlining it, and really evidence of your impact, you can't sustain effectiveness. And certainly, for us, the issue was scale, we couldn't scale unless we had had that. So, I think we used our ecosystem of faculty, and campuses, and students to apply things that we were seeing and learning, and studying, and to contribute to scholarly work. And we did. So, I think all these three pillars, I think of them together kind of as that ecosystem. You have your vision, and your resources, and your policy, and your expectations and requirements, and you have your faculty development to operationalize all of that. And you have research that informs, and refines, and elevates it. And then all of these three continuously reinforce each other.

And when one is weak, if you have things that are out of balance, I feel like we were in, Michelle mentioned a little bit about that, too, then things suffer. You're not going to be able to scale, which is what I think in some ways we experienced. Quality and equity suffer, and you have to have them all, I think, strong and in balance so that you can have those systematic and consistent results.

Kelvin: Tom, anything you want to say about these three intersecting things before you take us on into the next topic?

Tom: Probably not a lot because those are really great answers. [Chuckles] My thoughts feel very shallow in comparison. Maybe it's because I'm a university administrator and I tend to think like an administrator. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: So, I was thinking leadership might be something like, "Well, we see a market opportunity for this kind of a program, and we need to develop this kind of a program." Their next step ergo, would be we have to train faculty, prepare them in order to deliver that program effectively at high quality. And that faculty development will be informed by the latest research and evidence-based practice. But of course, it's not quite that linear. It's going to be, as Alex said, sort of an ecosystem. And it's not just flowing in one direction either. It's going to flow up, and back, and sideways, too. But yeah, I agree with your closing comments, Alex, that if any one of them is weak, the whole system will suffer from it. How about you, Kelvin, before I move on to question two?

Kelvin: I don't think I can add anything substantive. Why don't you lead us on?

Tom: All right. So, you both have over your career seen a lot of different approaches to quality assurance in online design and teaching. And I wonder as you look across higher ed, how would you contrast what doesn't work with what does work? When do efforts to prepare and support online faculty really work well? What are some of those things that are correlated with success? And then when do they fail? What are the things that just don't really work? And so, Alex, we're going to start with you this time.

Alex: Okay. I love this question. Sometime between when we were re-branded from the SUNY Learning Network to Open SUNY, I was asked to create a faculty development program for Open SUNY, which we already had one for SUNY Online – is very thoughtful, very award-winning, it was large... Like you said at the top, Kelvin, I've trained tons of faculty, and we were a centralized sort of cooperative and opt-in cooperative at the time. And so, darn, I lost my train of thought. But I guess in general, when you think

about those pillars that we just talked about, when they're not in place or they're not balanced, there's going to be problems. And I think it starts at the top. We observed that those SUNY campuses that had that alignment flourished, and those that didn't struggle with efforts that remained like an individual faculty or staff level initiative. That's what I was going to say.

It's like they asked me to design this faculty development program, and I said, "We don't need a faculty development program. What we need is institutions within SUNY to think strategically about online. Why are they doing it?" And the answer to that question is going to be different depending on the mission and vision of the institution and what they are using online teaching and learning for. So, I said, "We know what..." At that time, this was like 2014, I said, "We know what works in terms of course design and in terms of faculty development. We have to get our institutions to think much more strategically about the enterprise of online education." So, the reality is that if it stays at an individual level, an individual can't allocate resources, they can't change policy, they can't create any strategy independently. I've seen almost every model of faculty development at SUNY across our 64 institutions because every institution has their own institution. [Chuckles] I know it seems like a system from the outside, but inside it's like they don't call us the Empire State for no reason. Every institution has a little empire. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Alex: And it's a challenge sitting at the system level and trying to herd all the cats. And we have doctoral institutions all the way to community colleges, and at Cobleskill, they teach people how to milk cows. It's just like everything and the kitchen sink. So, I guess I've seen what doesn't work. Let me just tell you some things that I think really doesn't work. One-off workshops, if the goal is merely responding to random requests of areas of interest from people, or if it's about compliance, or trying to target an initiative or whatever, you're going to get minimal transfer into practice, and faculty are going to feel processed, not supportive, and it's too disjointed and not cohesive. So, that's one. Another one is technology-focused training. So, training how to versus why to and when to. I have always been a why to and when to person, it's about pedagogy for me first, technology in the service of pedagogy.

So, the tools and the tech don't produce quality. Pedagogy does. So, if you focus on helping people to understand why and when, you slip in the tech to... Obviously, you have to understand the technology, you have to use it effectively, efficiently, whatever. But the pedagogy to me is first. So, when you focus just on technology, and how to push buttons, to me that doesn't work. If you treat online teaching as an afterthought, or as some add-on, I think when institutions don't view or recognize online course

design, and teaching, and continuous improvement as an academic effort, endeavor, professional development or faculty development becomes more performative and about compliance. And so, quality then suffers. And I think another thing that doesn't work is a lack of community. Faculty need to feel connected, and they need to have dialogue in an ongoing, if we expect continuous improvement, people's skills change, content changes, disciplines change, technology changes, all of that is for sure.

So, if you don't have a community with which to engage in an ongoing way, you get isolation. And that has a whole host of problems that are associated with it. And then I think another thing that doesn't work is not having any instructional designers. Faculty are experts in their discipline, and they shouldn't be expected to be experts in tech, learning science, accessibility, digital pedagogy overnight. You develop that knowledge, those skills, those attitudes, but it doesn't happen overnight. So, you need some help, some support, some guidance, a sherpa to help you through the valleys and the peaks of online course design, and your skills as an online course facilitator, so...

Tom: Yeah, those are great.

Alex: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah, thanks for sharing. Michelle, in your experience, what have you seen that you think works well or does not work well?

Michelle: Not surprisingly, we have a lot of overlap, Alex. I'll explain my context a little bit because I haven't done that yet, but I work in California, and I work for the California Community College system. We are the largest system of higher education in the nation. We serve 2.1 million... Actually, we're back up to 2.2 million students. There was obviously a big dip during COVID, and I just learned that our number has actually already rebounded. And so, we were really excited about that. We have 116 community colleges, so it's the same kind of model, Alex. And even though it's a system, every college is individually... it has its own board of directors, has its own president, every college has its own faculty bargaining agreement. So, it's very much relates to what you're talking about in New York.

When it comes to what works and what doesn't work, I think that I want to start by mentioning what Alex said about resourcing online education, and in community colleges, the reason our numbers have rebounded, and by numbers, I shouldn't say numbers, I should say, the reason we are serving so many humans today is because of the ongoing commitment to open access, which online education is a really big part of. So, before COVID, I

think we were around 30% of our enrollments were online, and we're actually over 50% last year still.

So, it's really increased online access for students, which we have to maintain in the face of things like agentic AI, which is something that is really emerging as a... Well, it's there, it's a priority. So, some of the things over the years that have worked and that haven't worked, the idea of having a faculty member complete an online course before they start teaching online. So, that idea of preparing faculty, which goes back to an earlier episode, Tom and Kelvin, the number of which I cannot remember. [Chuckles] It might be the same one Alex mentioned, I don't know. But in that episode, you also talked about how that approach really lifts up the quality of instruction across all modalities. And so, that's really important, and I do think that's an effective practice. However, not just any course, it has to be a good course, right? [Chuckles] So, what do we mean by good?

So, that's when we start thinking about the effective practices for that course design, but also to ensure that faculty experience a course that is facilitated by a human, and they have the sense that that human on the other side of the screen is a real person who cares about their learning, who's going to reach out and give them a warm nudge if they're late with something really building that experience, which refers to the situated learning theory, which usually applies to internships, but it's the same kind of thing. If we want faculty to teach online, they need to experience what it feels like to learn online, and having that be embedded in empathy, and a relationship with an instructor, and really building community with others in the course. That is what works. Where we see problems is when my opinion, the course that prepares a faculty member to teach online is self-paced, but they're teaching facilitated courses that are open access, and we have everybody in them, right?

Incredibly diverse group of learners. So, I think that that talks a little bit about both sides. And then in terms of synchronous professional development, because my brain always thinks in modalities, much like Alex said, the one-off webinars are nowhere near as effective as series or communities of practice approaches that build the relationships and the trust and create spaces where faculty can be vulnerable, and take risks, and share their fears, and really kind of unpack things in a safe place. I think that's really, really important. And including online modalities in that synchronous design, so that we don't have the barrier of place all the time. In California, most of our classes are taught by part-time faculty who aren't on campus all the time. So, really thinking creatively about how to take down those walls and ensure access is available to anybody who's ready to lean in and learn. And that's something we're taking to heart now with AI at the state level in California.

Tom: Yeah, that's great. Thank you both for those insights. Kelvin, before you go to the next question, anything you want to add to that?

Kelvin: Maybe two quick things. One, just to call attention to the fact that both of you, Michelle and Alex, multiple times have referenced by word or concept scale and quality, which some folks who are not as close to the action on this topic might not see those concepts going together. Big and good, oh, okay. So, I heard that theme. And then the other is, I think it's interesting, I think I occasionally hear that the kind of detailed faculty preparation, zoomed in high quality experiences that you've each described, some I have found now look at that as a bit passe. Why would we need to do that? And I think it's interesting that you both said like a... I don't know if you use these words, but a cohort experience, a facilitated experience, the situated learning, Michelle, like you talked about like be in it. Experience it, so that you can understand it, so that you can go do it.

And all I'm doing is just drawing attention to the stuff that you all have said, because I can't really add anything substantive, but I wouldn't want anybody to miss what you all have said there. Tom?

Tom: Yeah, no, I agree. I don't have anything to add. I think those are great answers. I was nodding along with both of you all the way.

Kelvin: Which is better than nodding off.

Tom: [Chuckles] Yeah. Well, how could I? Yeah.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Nod along, not nod off. That's right. Shall we move forward?

Tom: Yes.

Kelvin: I would say sort of this next jumping off point is really of a kind, right? It just really kind of follows from what we were just talking about. So, at first, it may just feel like, "Hey, we're going over the same ground we just covered." But I think what I would invite us to do is kind of here's an old callback, kind of in a Jerome Bruner ever-narrowing spiral. We're just kind of zooming in a little bit more. So, those of us involved in online and digital education get new challenges every day and amidst rapid change, what do you see as essential principles or practices, dare we say, timeless principles to embrace in ensuring that online course design and teaching are carried out effectively in ways that concrete benefit students?

We were just talking about quality assurance, but now we're just zoomed in a little bit to break it down into some things to like, "If you forget everything else, hold onto this, and make sure that the effective course design and teaching actually connects with students." Maybe we start with

Michelle and then Alex, and then Tom and I can chime in if we have anything. Michelle?

Michelle:

So, I love answering this question because as I was thinking through it, Alex came to mind, and Alex and I first met... Oh, my goodness. We tried to figure this out further recently, I think it was almost 28 years ago, which is just nuts. But we met at an online learning consortia. It was a Sloan-C back in the day event, and one of the things that I recall connecting us was that we were both users of a tool called VoiceThread, which is still around. But again, this was a really long time ago when VoiceThread was brand new. The reason I love using VoiceThread is because it brings in the human connection into the asynchronous space without losing the asynchronicity. And that's rare.

And so, what I have learned over the years is how vital human connection is in everything that we do related to this topic, across all the pillars when we're designing faculty development, the connection between the facilitator and faculty, between their peers, the way that we design the faculty development, I've learned so much over the years about how the human brain is wired through evolution, how we as human creatures, we seek out verbal cues and nonverbal cues. And when they're not there, if we're in a place of threat, if a student is in a place of psychological threat, which is where many of our students are, particularly those who are underserved, who don't have their basic needs filled, they're looking for cues that aren't there. And so that's really, really important.

And the other thing I would say is I kind of think about it, I'll go back to the hot drink metaphor, but if you think about water boiling as it continues to boil, I mean, there's things that get left, and things boil down to something. And something stays and something doesn't. And the more I start thinking about the huge sweeping changes we are amidst right now, and the loneliness crisis that is happening as a backdrop through these very difficult times with artificial intelligence, we have to lean in and double down on our human connection, and trust, and conveying that we care about each other, and checking in on each other, and that goes across the workplace. That should be a style of leadership.

I mean, vulnerability is a core value here, and that will always be timeless. And I think that the less humans experience it, the more they're going to crave it. And so, I want to put a call out there when we're talking about the pillar of leadership vision, that should be part of our leadership strategy. We are centering human connection, and that's still not something that I hear very often. So, I'm just going to end with that. [Chuckles]

Tom:

Yeah.

Kelvin: Thanks for that. Alex?

Alex: So, I think good teaching is good teaching in any modality. So, when you're talking about timeless principles, I think these are things that apply regardless of whatever modality you happen to be in. And I love being in this program with Michelle because we've known each other for such a long time, and each other's work for such a long time, and have very similar things that we think about, and that we've dealt with and that we've tried to address in our professional work. So, I love listening to her. And yes, I loved VoiceThread and I still love VoiceThread. And I remember that day, Michelle, when we met at that OLC conference, you were presenting, and I showed up at your event, and you were talking about VoiceThread, which I also did. So, I felt like we were sisters. Totally connected.

Michelle: Me, too. Me, too. [Chuckles]

Alex: [Chuckles] Yeah. So, I think that when you're designing online instruction, it's important to design for clarity and transparency. And I think that that's true no matter the modality. So, you want, and especially in an online environment, you need clear navigation. You need explicit expectations, you need alignment, you need well-labeled materials. And I feel like this is not optional. This is like equity work. The magic formula for me is well-articulated course objectives, content that directly aligns with the objectives, independent and collaborative learning activities that align with the content and the objectives, and then assessments and evaluations that align with the activities, and provide feedback, and opportunities for support. To me, that's the magic formula for quality online course design and is timeless to me. And I think that's true of face-to-face instruction, too, by the way, or synchronous online instruction. I think it's not different depending on the modality.

Michelle talks about and talked about this, but centering on human connection and belonging is not a trend. Humanizing online instruction is not a trend. To me, it's at the root of a learner-centeredness, and learner persistence, and success. I think presence, and trust, and care matter as much online as anywhere else. So, what I'm saying is true of online, especially true of online because we have the additional technical barrier, but it's true of any modality. So, you can also sit in a 500-room lecture hall at the end of the whatever seating looking down at your instructor, and also feel like there's barrier and a distance there. [Chuckles] So, it's true of any modality. And I think that people need to think like a designer and teach like a facilitator while online teaching is planned and needs to be intentional. And there's a lot to know about how to actually be learner centered.

It's not just about being chummy with your students or even caring about your students. There's so much I interrogate myself at every moment in my online instruction as to whether I'm actually taking away the opportunity for my students to learn, by me expressing all the stuff that I know about online teaching and learning, which is a lot, right? But it's not about me, and it's not about my passion. It's about catalyzing that in the students. So, faculty need to develop that skill and understanding, and they need time, and they need support. And it's a metacognitive activity and also a thoughtful, it requires reflection, and it requires planning and thinking. So, you have to have that. I think thinking about accessibility and inclusivity means thinking about online courses that are good for everyone. It's not an accommodation; it's anticipatory design. That's how I think of it.

It's thinking in anticipation of your learners and who they are in the context that they're in and anticipating that with the design elements in your course. So, that's good design. That's timeless to me. And also applicable, no matter the modality. And then the last thing I'd say is that you need to use research to inform your instruction, not the other way around. I think that learning sciences, and theoretical frameworks, and culturally responsive pedagogy, and equity minded design, and our own institutional data, our own data within our own courses should inform our understanding and our decisions. And I think all of these principles anchor us in the current world of AI, the modality shifts, regulatory changes, and all the turbulence in our field, political, cultural, and otherwise. I think that these things that are timeless, anchor us. And I think these are things that have guided me, and have guided SUNY, and remain essential no matter what LMS you're using or what tools you're using, right? [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Thank you for that. Alex, Tom, would you add anything in there?

Tom: Just one brief comment. It's interesting when you look at what both of you said, it ties into a theme that's been recurring over the 10 and a half years of this podcast, which is just the student as the north star, is how we've referred to that. So, when you're looking at design, policy, leadership, practice, research – every decision that's made should be in the service of the student, the student as the north star. And if it's not in the best interest of the student, then you shouldn't be making that decision. And I think as long as you hold onto that, you can't go wrong.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, no, that's right. Yeah, I'll just say good on you. I mean, I think you both just unpacked a lot of time-earned wisdom. I mean, anybody listening to you all for the first time, I think hopefully can tell you know what you're talking about. You've been there; you've done that. And I think, Alex, what you said at the end there is exactly right that amidst other variables, amidst other forces, we want to hold to what is stable and

consistent. And it's those things that you both have spoken about, the human connection, the what's the end result, and is there alignment? And are we serving the student through clarity and in anticipation of their needs but staying engaged because lest we think we have it all figured out, and we just are on autopilot; we have to continue to take in new data and adjust in little fine course corrections. So, yeah, that's excellent. That was me saying more than a plan, too. Tom, get us out of here. What's our grand finale question here?

Tom: Yeah. So, we have one last question. The clock does wind down, and I'm sure Kelvin's Thermos is getting cold. So, think about your answer in terms of sort of a short social media post if you were going to post something, and there are two questions. One, is there anything we haven't talked about in this subject? Is there something that has been unaddressed when it comes to leadership vision, faculty professional development, and research and evidence-based practice? And then secondly, what resources, one or two, if you've got one, you don't have to, but if you happen to have one that you would refer our audience to go a little deeper, just feel free to share that. So, Alex, we're going to start with you with this one.

Alex: All right. So, not known for short. [Chuckles]

Tom: [Chuckles] Kelvin always says, "I don't do pithy."

Alex: Yeah, but I'm going to try. I mean, that's a really interesting design challenge, right? So, it's interesting, Tom, because I want to piggyback on really on what you said about everything being centered on the learner. Everything that we do is about the learner. And I mean, I get up in the morning because I really believe that I can inform and influence the quality of the instructional experience, the educational experience of the students of the State University of New York, and that that's meaningful, vital work because we're a public university system. The largest in the galaxy, right? I mean, yeah, okay.

Kelvin: {Laughs}

Alex: The one in California has a lot, but we're not just community colleges, we're everything.

And the people of the State of New York, one in five children in the State of New York are poor, which means their parents are poor. And education is one of the ways to assist people to exit poverty. So, I feel so strongly, and I get very emotional about this because my mom was a single parent, and four kids in a country and a language that was not her first language and country. So, to me, I feel like here's my short social media thing, that

equity and the learner experience is the purpose of our work. And all of these three pillars that we've been talking about, they exist to support it.

And so, I think if anything is missing, we've talked about lots of stuff, but it's like the why behind it all and the why is the learner, and this is all about what Michelle's work is about. This is one of the reasons I love her so much about, and the humanizing, and it is just so... That is why we are doing what we do is for the learners. So, in terms of my suggestions for research, anything by Michelle, that's my first thing. And...

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: [Chuckles] Plus one, plus one to that. Yeah.

Alex: And then the second thing I would mention, and this is why Michelle and I love each other too, because we're like parallel and opposite ends of the country. I've been working for the last few years on an inclusive online teaching practices project, and this is a labor of love that I do in between raindrops with a colleague at Cal State, LA and a researcher from the California Virtual Colleges and about 90 individuals from across the United States who are annotating a set of 41 inclusive online teaching practices. And I'll share the link to that. We're still in the editorial process of that, but we collaboratively with all of these institutions and individuals, have taken a set of inclusive teaching practices, adapted them for online and are making them freely and openly available. The cool thing about that resource is that it's connected to whatever online course quality rubric you may be using.

So, you can look at the practices from OSCQR, you can look at them from Quality Matters. You can look at them from CVC-OEI, you can look at them from COLT. And it's been one of the funnest things that I've done in a very long time. Of course, I have to mention OSCQR as a resource that I would point to, and I would point to organizations like WCET and OLC and POD and EDUCAUSE and the special interest groups that some of these organizations may have that are focused on online teaching and learning. And then there's some resources that are not... So, I would mention the Peralta Rubric, the Peralta Equity Rubric, which is a really good resource. I would mention work by Jesse Stommel in Critical Digital Pedagogy. And then my most personal favorite is Feminist Online Pedagogy out of Tulane. And I have links for all of this, and I would love to share them with anyone who would be interested in this. My own dissertation is in there somewhere, and AI is in there somewhere. But yeah, Michelle, you go. [Chuckles]

Michelle: Thank you for this kind words, Alex. That was lovely. So, as I think about the pillars, I don't have another pillar if that's maybe what we're looking

for here, but I think there's a foundation, which is well-being. We've been talking about serving students, and it's all focused... Students as our guiding star, our north star, and well-being with regards to students, but also faculty and staff, everyone. I heard someone, and I wish I knew who said it, but probably lots of people have said it: Teacher, and faculty, and staff conditions are student conditions. And I am really concerned about you all out there.

It's just a really incredibly hard time, and it just feels like it's getting harder. And so, keeping that in mind and modeling that vulnerable leadership style of checking in with people, and leaving space for people to just share when they need to share, building connections and relationships instead of looking for really... [Chuckles] Counting the numbers, counting the beans all the time, those are things that we need to take to heart. So, a couple of the resources that I'm going to share is, first of all, it might seem strange, but Gallup has been doing some really cool research on teacher retention and burnout. And there's a great site that has some suggestions about how to improve teacher retention and burnout. There's a book by an anthropologist named Alison Pugh, and I love this book. It's called *The Last Human Job: The Work of Connecting in a Disconnected World*.

Kelvin: Wow.

Michelle: And the author talks about how the labor that we bring to teaching, the human labor is something that we know is important, but within the systems we work, it's not been valued systemically. It's hard to fit it into the systems. And then she goes on to make some predictions about how AI is going to make that more challenging. So, I really recommend it as a read. And then the US Surgeon General's Report about the loneliness epidemic. If you haven't read it, I'm just flip through it because it's so informative. And then finally, if you do want to learn more about my work, the site that we put together to curate a lot of resources and information about humanizing is humanizeol.org, and you'll find some research briefs there too that you could check out.

Tom: Those are great. Thank you both for all those resources and for spending so much time with us today. Kelvin, do you want to try and put a bow on it?

(Musical Outro)

Kelvin: I will. I think we could have another 10 and a half years on this set of topics and questions right here probably, but maybe we won't. So, just to find a pause point, I will by way of summation, say that course design and teaching matter when well-executed, consistent with evidence-driven

practices, students benefit. Online course design and teaching amplifies those benefits. Professional development and support for faculty are key quality assurance efforts for online education. How's that?

Tom: Amen, brother. Yeah. Yeah, that's awesome. And you two ladies are awesome. Thank you to our esteemed Pillar Panel return guests, Michelle and Alex. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: And I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.