

TOPcast Episode 47: Engaging in Engagement Research for Online Students

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(musical transition)

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

Kelvin Thompson: And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast: The World-Famous Teaching Online Podcast.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Is that part of our new service trademark kind of thing?

Tom: That's right. If you say it enough, it becomes true.

Kelvin: There is some truth *to* that.

Tom: Actually, you're the one that looks at the Google Analytics, right?

Kelvin: No, we have people from around the world!

Tom: We actually have international listeners.

Kelvin: It's absolutely, legitimately true. Every month and annually, we look, and it's mostly North America, United States, but you know, we got a—

Tom: We have a Canadian. *(laughter)*

Kelvin: Well, no.

Tom: And we've interviewed them on the show!

Kelvin: For reals. Absolute, legit for reals. As I recall—I'm pretty sure this is right—the second country is a tie, as I recall, between Canada and Australia.

Tom: Really? Okay.

Kelvin: The UK, I want to say, maybe comes in third.

Tom: Well, given those countries, it makes sense. We are speaking English.

Kelvin: Is that what this is?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: Occasionally, I lapse into Spanish, my terrible Spanish.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: ¿Hablas Español?

Kelvin: It's possible that your Spanish is better than my English.

Tom: *(laughter)* Maybe.

Kelvin: I don't lapse into my mother tongue of red-neck southern American, you know.

Tom: *(laughter)* Well, I heard the squeak of the thermos and the gentle gurgles of—

Kelvin: And the leaking on the table, apparently, because what in world?

Tom: Oh yeah, look at you. You're making a mess.

Kelvin: Golly! *(laughter)*

Tom: Well.

Kelvin: They're not going to let us back in the studio, or at least not me.

Tom: Stay away from the electronic material, Kelvin.

Kelvin: I'm glad it's on that side of the table. Goodness, what a mess. *(laughter)*

Tom: If only you could see what this looks like.

Kelvin: Oh, gee whiz. *(laughter)* Instead of your normal froof, maybe it needs to be some Comet cleanser.

Tom: Yeah, that's right.

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Don't mix those two up.

Tom: Yeah, you can't tell the difference. We need some sort of a coaster, I think.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Alright, so I'm stirring in my whitener of choice.

Kelvin: Yes. That's not too bad.

Tom: And I assume you have chosen this coffee for a reason.

Kelvin: I always choose coffee for a reason, Tom. Yes, today's coffee, I might point out, is a single-origin Ka'u from Hawaii's Local Buzz Coffee on the big island of Hawaii. And as a note, while a lot of folks are familiar with Kona coffee—a lot of brand recognition there—Ka'u is from another coffee brewing region on the same island with its own regional characteristics. This specific coffee was brought back from a family trip by our UCF colleague, Jacob Bates. Thank you, Jacob. Jacob visited the Paradise Meadows Orchard & Bee Farm. It grows, roasts, and distributes this Ka'u, Hawaii's Local Buzz Estate Coffee. And Jacob selected a dark roast for us to brew and enjoy.

Tom: Cool. Well, thank you, Jacob. I remember watching his trip from afar on social media while he traveled around Hawaii and hung out on the beach and ate cool foods.

Kelvin: Probably macadamia nuts.

Tom: Probably.

Kelvin: And pineapple.

Tom: So, this is good. It is a little strong.

Kelvin: Yeah, it's—

Both: The dark roast.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Mhmm. So, apart from the pun on the caffeine buzz some folks look for...

Tom: *(laughter)*

Kelvin: Not me, I just like the coffee. I thought that the coffee from this actively engaged buzzing farm—which also produces honey, macadamia nuts, and other products, and distributes throughout the island and online—was very appropriate for today's episode. So, you said the coffee was good?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: How was the connection, Tom?

Tom: Well... I get it.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: I get it because of how you set it up.

Kelvin: I'm trying. I'm redeeming my Kung-Fu.

Tom: Yeah, it's an actively engaged farm.

(sips coffee)

Tom: Yeah, we are going to talk a little bit about engagement online.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: And how to have an engaged online experience.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: And that's cool, I get it. So, I at least got it. *(laughter)*

Kelvin: That's better than not getting it.

Tom: That's better than not getting it. That's right.

Kelvin: There's days I worry about you not getting it. *(laughter)*

Tom: True.

Kelvin: But hey, it's something.

Tom: Well, maybe we should clue in the rest of our listeners here about why this is thematically correct.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: So, Kelvin, during the 2018 OLC Accelerate conference, you had the opportunity to interview the presenters of one of their Best in Track sessions.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: You spoke to Dr. Tawnya Means, who is currently at the University of Nebraska where she is the Director of the Teaching and Learning Center in the College of Business, and who we've known for a long time back when she used to be a Florida resident

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And Dr. Meridith Bergeron who is from Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University where she serves as Director of Educational Technology.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: They were recognized for the best session in the research track for "Measuring Online Graduate Student Connectedness and Engagement Activities That Impact

Completion Rates.” So, your conversation focused on a line of inquiry that they had about online program engagement which they’re now conducting.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: So, that topic is one that I think everybody listening to this is probably interested in.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, for sure. We talk a little bit about engagement broadly, and of course, I think most of us folks who listen to this podcast probably focus a little bit more on online course engagement, but their specific emphasis is on program engagement. So, we’ll talk about both of those things, but that is their particular interest.

Tom: Okay. Well now, through the magic of podcast time travel, here’s your conversation with Meridith and Tawnya.

(musical transition)

Kelvin: Hey, Tawnya and Meridith, so good to have you on TOPcast. Welcome! Glad you could do this.

Tawnya Means: Thank you very much for having us. We’re glad to be here.

Meridith Bergeron: Yes, thank you for having us.

Kelvin: We’re going to talk about a topic that I personally hear a whole lot about. I bet a lot of our listeners do because it’s so important in our online teaching world, and you guys have been presenting on a very zoomed in version of this topic here at the OLC Accelerate conference. But the idea of online student engagement. Let me just throw this real broad question out to you guys. I said it’s a big deal to all of our instructional designers, online faculty, online learning leader audience members. Why is online student engagement such a big deal?

Tawnya: I think it’s a big deal because it’s hard to measure.

Meridith: And hard to define. It’s kind of a buzz word isn’t it? So, people say “engagement” and we’re all supposed to know what that means.

Kelvin: Sounds like it’s better than disengagement.

Meridith: Sure.

Kelvin: Sounds like it’s something you would want.

Meridith: Yes.

Kelvin: Right, we want *engaged* members of a community or members of a class context. Don’t want disengaged. We want engaged employees, not disengaged employees. Had some of those, don’t want them.

Meridith: Yes.

Kelvin: Right?

Tawnya: Don't want disengaged employees and you don't want disengaged students. And I think it's a big concern in higher education, and online education specifically, that students are engaged, and faculty see that.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Meridith: I think from the perspective just teaching, whether you're in the room, whether you're remote, whether you're synchronous, whether you're asynchronous, you want them to feel like people are connected.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Meridith: You want to feel like not only are they connected to you, they're connected to their peers, they're connected to the content.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Meridith: But you want to feel like they care, that they're wanting to learn, and so we talk about engagement I think as a proxy for this idea of being connected and caring about what we're doing.

Kelvin: Mhmm. I think that's good. I wonder if you— What do you think about this? In the early days, I've been in this field for about 20 years and certainly, at the beginning of my time, there was, and I think I still see this periodically, but I'm curious what you guys think. There's sort of this perception that the general public has, maybe folks who have had a lot of firsthand experience, "Oh, online courses, hmm, yeah, it feels...I need to be in that classroom because I need to be a part of something, and that seems kind of lonely and kind of eugh." It's sort of like this implicit assumption that it will be this disengaging, disconnected experience. That was something I saw early, early on. I still see it periodically. Do you think that's changed over time or do you think it's always an issue?

Tawnya: Well, I think initially when we were first starting to establish how the technology would work, we kind of put things out there as this correspondence course on all electrons.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: It was just the thing that you did in your house by yourself with a little booklet that you sent back in the mail, only you did it electronically. And that is a very disengaged or disconnected kind of feeling. I'm figuring it out on my own. I have only the little resources that I can manage to get in the mail. And then I have to send it off to somewhere, and who knows how long it'll take to get feedback or realize the results from that? But then I think as we started realizing that technology can do more, I think we started incrementing what we could do. And to the point where I think now as faculty get more accustomed, comfortable, familiar, with what can happen online, that's now coming back into the

classroom experience as well. So, we see people who are just saying, this needs to be an engaged experience. It needs to be an active experience. It needs to be something that doesn't just have you sit while I broadcast something to you but has you doing something.

Kelvin: Mhmm. I have a colleague who used to quip, "Hey, you want to see distance education? Go look at the back row of that large lecture hall. There's some distance education for you."

Tawnya: Exactly.

Kelvin: Physically and transactionally, right? What would be some examples—to put you on the spot here, Tawnya and Meridith—what would be some examples of technology innovations that have affected the way that we conceptualize and practice engagement?

Tawnya: I think you should share about your experience in the doctoral program.

Meridith: Sure. I recently completed the EDD program at the University of Florida in Educational Technology.

Kelvin: Congratulations.

Meridith: Thank you. And the program—

Tawnya: She's Dr. Meridith.

Meridith: *(laughter)*

Kelvin: Dr. Meridith, that's right.

Meridith: I am. The program was very centered on the community of inquiry.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Meridith: And the program faculty were very purposeful on making sure that we were engaged in our program and not only with the university but also with the faculty and other students. And I came away from that experience with some great friends, and my best friend Sarah, she's actually part of our research project. And she wasn't able to be here at the conference, but we are very connected, and we've collaborated a lot over the last four years. I can't believe it's been four years, but it has. And I did my master's degree online as well. But I felt very connected to not only UF but my faculty and the other students as well, and I was so excited to see another cohort member here at OLC Accelerate. So, it was nice. It's been a very good feeling for me, feeling connected to not only the university but other students in the program as well.

Kelvin: To what do you attribute those feelings of connectedness?

Meridith: I think it's the way that the program was structured and that they made sure that we took our courses together. We had an online platform that we used for networking with just the other students, so that made a big difference as well. We also had synchronous sessions every month, so it was an opportunity for us to interact and engage with our faculty and the students as well.

Kelvin: Cool. So, we've been talking about online student engagement broadly, and you guys have been engaged with a research project in a very zoomed in type of online student engagement with graduate students. Can you tell us broadly about the research project and what it is and what you've learned and so forth?

Tawnya: Sure. So, one of the things that we connected with each other around what was happening in graduate programs. I am Assistant Dean and Director of a Teaching and Learning Center with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who has a great online MBA program for the College of Business. And I'm one of the capstone instructors for the MBA, so I'm working with students who are working professionals, they have a number of years of experience—usually seven to nine years of experience—in the workforce. They are bringing into the program really rich stories—experiences—of things that they've done as they've gone through their career, and then they're having coursework that is helping them to understand how that applies to the business environment, how to manage, how to lead, but they are kind of thinking of their little world in the context of their work experience. As I'm working with those students throughout that term, I'm trying to help them see that somebody else has had their experiences that are similar around the concept or the context that we're talking about, even if it's in a different environment. So, a lot of the technologies that I've used in that class have tried to help them be able to see what the other person is doing in a way that they can relate to them, that they can apply lessons learned from them, and that they can build on that networking opportunity for them to realize, "Oh, I've got a friend at Adobe who's doing something very similar to what I'm doing at Dr. Pepper. They're very different companies, but we're having some of the same experiences."

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: And so, what elements of that in-course experience build toward that kind of reaction that Meridith is having in a program where she's being able to be in a cohort, to get that relationship building. I can do that in a course but then how do I go beyond the course to make it a program because we're not a cohort program?

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: And so, how can we take those elements and then beyond what happens within the course or within the program, what happens on just the outside of the curriculum? Mentoring relationships or reaching out to people who are outside of the institution or alumni or things like that. So, how can we build that into our program? We started thinking about that. We wanted to look at the engagement research itself, which a lot of it is focused on the undergraduate area.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: And say, what about an institution makes it a good place or a good environment to build those kinds of connections?

Kelvin: Mhmm. And so, how have you structured your research into that after looking at the initial literature? What have you guys decided to do?

Meridith: Well, we're building an institutional inventory, and we're wanting to have institutions and programs participate by completing the OSCS, which is the Online Student Connectedness Survey.

Tawnya: Yes.

Kelvin: OSCS.

Meridith: OSCS, thank you.

Kelvin: Or the "os-cuss." Nobody wants to say that.

Meridith: *(laughter)* No. But what we're trying to gather is just key indicators of what makes a program unique and what makes an institution unique as well. And...do you want to finish up?

Tawnya: Go for it.

Meridith: Okay. We would like to have participating institutions and programs participate by completing the OSCS, and it's a 25-item questionnaire in four categories. And really, we want to see what key indicators come about with connectedness and how their students feel connected to their programs and the institutions.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: So, the OSCS is pretty vetted. It's been used and we have some research around it. But I don't think anybody has really developed a really good inventory of the institutions where the students are in.

Kelvin: Mm.

Tawnya: And so, we put together a list of questions that we thought were really valuable and relevant to how would we categorize, how do we classify, a particular institution around engagement?

Kelvin: Mm.

Tawnya: And we brought that pre-developed set of questions to our session and then after we had explained some of the background and what we were going to be looking at, we asked the participants in the session to give us feedback on the questions. So, were these the right questions?

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: If they were thinking about their program, would they be able to know what we were talking about? Would they be able to answer the questions? We got some really valuable feedback from them about some things we hadn't even considered, and it really, I think, is going to help us to shape up that institutional inventory so it's usable for a variety of institutions.

Kelvin: Let me see if I get this right, and please correct me if I'm wrong. So, individual students will complete the OSCS, but you're providing some categorical structure around institutions at which, for lack of a better term, buckets of students will complete that so that you can get to the point of looking for some patterns in relationships between institution characteristics and response patterns on the OSCS. Is that more or less right?

Tawnya: That's correct. Yes.

Kelvin: So, sounds like you're doing some... There's the OSCS, okay, here's what we think, kind of we're going out here and talking to the community and kind of getting some responses, so what's your next step from here?

Tawnya: Well, we had a good set of people who attended the session but it's still probably not broad enough.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: So, we'll tweak the inventory a little bit to match up with the feedback that we got from those people. And then what we'd like to do is send the survey out for some more input, make sure that that's measuring what we think it's going to measure. We'll do probably a little pilot, make sure that we're getting good data, and that from our perspective, that we're able to evaluate the responses that are coming in, and then we're just going to go into mode of trying to get as many people to respond as possible.

Kelvin: Mhmm. Are you going to try to... I guess I can see you doing this several different ways. Are you going to try to coordinate survey implementation through institutions, by institutions, and/or are you going to just kind of cast a very wide net for as many online students wherever as possible to complete their thing? What's your thought?

Tawnya: So, we'll focus on institutions that are willing to complete the inventory and then when they complete the inventory, we'll give them a customized link to the surveys.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: The OSCS. O-S—

Kelvin: O-S-C-S, yes.

Tawnya: *(laughter)* Too many letters. So that when we get that data back, we can tie it directly to the institution.

Kelvin: Mm, right. Sure, gotcha. So, what do you think your timeline is? Do you think in the next year? What are you hoping to get accomplished by when?

Meridith: I think we're hoping to accomplish this within the next year.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Meridith: We've been actively working towards it for almost eight to ten months maybe?

Tawnya: Yeah, about that.

Kelvin: Mhmm, things take time.

Meridith: It does, it takes some time. But we did get really good feedback yesterday at our session, and we have a lot of faculty and programs that are interested in joining us.

Kelvin: Mhmm. What do you think the big hook is here? What's the—I don't know, pick a metaphor—what's the promise land? What's the hoped-for, eventual payoff here? I mean, I got my speculations but what is it that's keeping you going down this line of inquiry? What are you thinking that you're going to add to the field or that you're going to learn in this process?

Tawnya: From my perspective, I'd like to know, given the environment that I'm in—

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: Given the type of students that I have and the needs that they have, what are some good practices that I can attempt to implement?

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: There's so many different ways that you can work on engagement. I can focus on it at the instructional design level.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: I can focus on it at the faculty level.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: I can focus on it on the program level, or the college level, or the institution. There are so many different ways that we can approach this problem that in some ways, if we don't have some guidance, we could spend a lot of time spinning our wheels and not really knowing if we're getting anywhere.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tawnya: And so, my hope is that we can come out of this with some recommendations or some suggested paths to take.

Kelvin: At each of those level, you think?

Tawnya: Yes.

Kelvin: Mhmm. That's awesome. I think that would be a meaningful contribution, especially since it doesn't seem like we're losing online students anytime soon. It seems like we're just having more and more of them. So, it will be great to have them, wherever they are, having meaningful experiences.

Meridith: Well, and one other thing I'd add to it is the fact that so many programs are looking at online as the future. Online is what we're going to in five years, ten years, whatever. We're going to have to be online. Well, I would like to prepare those people who are getting into online to make the best decisions possible so that we continue to enhance the quality of an experience online.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Meridith: If everybody jumps online but nobody knows what they're doing, we really have a possibility to greatly degrade the experience.

Kelvin: Nobody wants that.

Tawnya: No.

Meridith: No. Nobody wants that. We want to keep making it better. It's advanced significantly since that correspondence course on electrons.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Meridith: And we want to keep it going in that same direction.

Kelvin: That's awesome. Well, I'm looking forward to following your work and seeing how things play out, and I hope you'll keep us informed. And hey, maybe we can have you guys back on further down the road and hear some of what you have found and what those lessons learned for institutions and instructors and program leaders are. That would be great, a year or so down the road. So, thank you very much, Tawnya and Meridith, for joining us. It's been great having you on and look forward to seeing what happens.

Meridith: Thank you.

Tawnya: Thank you for having us

Meridith: Thanks for having us.

(musical transition)

Tom: So, that was your conversation with Tawnya and Meridith.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: I enjoyed hearing that. I didn't get the chance to participate in that particular one during the conference.

Kelvin: We traded off on some of those interviews.

Tom: Yeah. So, any takeaways that you had kind of reflecting back on that interview live and then hearing it again?

Kelvin: I guess just the general importance of engagement online. Again, I think we tend to, in our field, focus a lot on course engagement at the instructor and student level, but I was really quite taken by their emphasis on the importance of online engagement at the program level, especially if you're dealing with exclusively online students.

Tom: Mhmm.

Kelvin: Right? We talk about that here some and the importance of, like in our case, here at UCF Online, success coaches and all that. Academic programs have their own identity and their own connections with students, and it kind of matters if all you're doing is completely online. What's your relationship with an institution like? What's your relationship with the program like beyond just the individual course level?

Tom: Yeah. One of the things they talked about is how important it is to consider different kinds of institutions in terms of engagement studies.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: There was some discussion about graduate program cohort—

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: And some strategies that might be specific for that particular context because I assume what works in one context isn't going to work in another context, and you have to be sort of intentional on how you want to engage or have engagement occur because I don't think it's something you can just assume is going to happen magically.

Kelvin: Right. *(laughter)* Well, I guess you can assume it's going to happen.

Tom: Yeah.

Both: *(laughter)*

Kelvin: That ain't going to make it so.

Tom: That's right. You know what they say about assume.

Kelvin: What is that, Tom?

Tom: Ah, well...This is a clean family podcast.

Kelvin: Okay, alright. We'll get the E-rating on our podcast.

Tom: *(laughter)* That's right.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. I think they're particularly interested in graduate programs, but I think many of the things we talked about, their interests would apply to online undergrad programs, too. By the way, I did hear from Tawnya and Meridith really recently, and so we've got kind of a little update to that interview. They tell us that if any of our listeners are intrigued by the idea of their research, they are finalizing as we record this their Institutional Review Board stuff, and they're actively looking for other institutions that might want to join their research study. So, if anybody's interested at all, we have a sign-up form that they have prepared, which we'll give you a URL here in a minute and which we'll also put in the show notes so you can go there and link others out. But if you fill out the sign-up form, they will follow up with more information about how to get involved in their study. So, here is the sign-up form. We made a little bit.ly link for it. So, bit.ly/topcast_gradstudy. All lowercase, no spaces.

Tom: Cool. Well, hopefully, everybody goes out and helps them out. So, shall I try to put a bow on it?

Kelvin: Put a bow on it, Tom. It'll be pretty.

Tom: Okay, we'll put a bow on this plane that we're landing. We'll mix the metaphors we always use.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: So, for the students who have online-only experiences with their institutions, "engagement" is even more important than it is for students just taking the occasional fully online course. That sort of stands to reason, I guess.

Kelvin: Mhmm.

Tom: Engagement might affect motivation, persistence, performance, and completion rates. So, we should all work to better engage with our exclusively online students.

Kelvin: Yeah, I would agree with that. That is true.

Tom: Cool.

Kelvin: If we've got just a second or two more, might I make some shameless plugs for our conscientious listeners?

Tom: Plug it in.

Kelvin: Hey, if you're still listening, this is just for you. Now you can tell your non-TOPcast listening colleague—you know you have at least one. You know, *that* person—you can tell them that it is easier than ever before to listen to TOPcast now. You can find us easily now on Spotify, perhaps the last of the big podcast platforms that wasn't as easy to find us on before.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: And in addition, TOPcast is now—believe this or not. This is amazing. We're so cutting-edge, 21st century—TOPcast is now an Alexa skill on the smart home devices from Amazon. So, try saying, "Alexa, open Teaching Online Podcast" and see what happens.

Tom: Don't say TOPcast because it won't know what you're talking about.

Kelvin: It's so true.

Tom: We tried it. *(laughter)*

Kelvin: It doesn't make any sense. In fact, the Alexa skill kind of answers back, "Okay. Now opening T-O-'puh'-cast, the Teaching Online Podcast."

Tom: Oh, really? Huh.

Kelvin: That's all it really knows how to say, the T-'up'-cast. So, the Teaching Online Podcast works. So, tell a friend about Spotify and the Alexa skill, or try them out yourself.

Tom: Yeah, I'm going to try it. We have one. We got it for Christmas.

Kelvin: Yeah, there you go.

Tom: We're going to give it a shot. That's pretty cool.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: *(laughter)* My wife will say—

Kelvin: Enough of you—

Tom: "Could you go listen to yourself with your headphones on please?"

Kelvin: *(laughter)* I think it's really cool.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Makes us sound smarter when it comes from one of those devices because it says "smart home device" right on it.

Tom: *(laughter)* That's right. It's a skill.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: That's right.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: *(laughter)* Maybe that's a good place to end.

Kelvin: Probably so.

Tom: So, until next time. For TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya!