TOPcast Episode 44: The Intertwined Futures of Online and Digital Learning

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(intro music)

Kelvin Thompson: From the 2018 OLC Accelerate conference, in front of a live audience, I'm Kelvin Thompson.

Tom Cavanagh: And I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you're listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey, everybody!

Tom: Hello, everybody.

Audience: *(clapping)*

Kelvin: That's awesome!

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Let's bring these folks home! *(laughter)*

Tom: *(laughter)*They wouldn't fit in that tiny little closet that we usually record in.

Kelvin: We could try.

Tom: We could, yeah, and it was actual applause. That was not applied—

Kelvin: *(laughter)* Made me feel really good.

Tom: —fake, special effects.

Kelvin: Didn't we do that one time? *(laughter)* Oh, that was a noise maker.

Tom: That's right, you had it on your phone.

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

Tom: Yeah, like a laugh track.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom:	To know how funny we are.
Kelvin:	*(laughter)*
Tom:	Because if you press the button on the app, it'll tell you you're funny.
Kelvin:	*(laughter)* Yeah.
Tom:	Yeah.
Kelvin:	Nobody tells me I'm that funny.
Tom:	So, I hear the, as we say, the dulcet gurgles—
Kelvin:	The dulcet gurgles, yeah.
Tom:	—of hot coffee.
Kelvin:	Uh-huh.
Tom:	What are we drinking? What's in the thermos, Kelvin?
Kelvin:	Well, today's coffee, Tom, is an El Salvador from Coava Coffee Roasters in Portland, Oregon.
Tom:	I was just there.
Kelvin:	Is that right?
Tom:	I was.
Kelvin:	You could have brought us some more coffee.
Tom:	I could've. It was raining.
Audience:	*(laughter)*
Tom:	I could have brought it.
Kelvin:	You could have been wet, and you could have brought us some more coffee.
Tom:	*(laughter)* Yeah, you're right. I should have.
Kelvin:	Okay, maybe next time. They call this El Ishco.
Tom:	El Ishco?
Kelvin:	El Ishco.

Tom:	Si.
Kelvin:	I couldn't find a good translation of that. And this particular batch of El Salvador El Ishco coffee is what they call natural processed. Now, you might recall that we've talked about coffee processing in the past. Natural processing allows the coffee cherries to dry over time so that the husks eventually fall off, as opposed to hand processing which, you know, they wash and they kind of get the husks off and all that to speed up the process. Generally, naturally processed coffees have a fruitier, I sometimes call it a juicier, taste.
Tom:	Juicier?
Kelvin:	I don't know.
Tom:	Okay.
Kelvin:	I don't know much. I just kind of make this stuff up.
Tom:	You and your technical mumbo jumbo.
Kelvin:	I know, what do I know? This particular coffee comes to us, we should say, by way of our colleagues at Portland State University who came on a site visit to UCF a while back as part of the work of the Frontier Set.
Tom:	Yep.
Kelvin:	A group of like-minded institutions focused on innovating in student access and student success, among other things, and so I thought this might be a good coffee choice for today's special episode.
Tom:	Well, special thanks to our friends at Portland State because not only did they send us coffee as a thank you, but it was like a coffee of the month. I just got another one.
Kelvin:	I know.
Tom:	Yeah
Kelvin:	That's great.
Tom:	Bless them.
Kelvin:	A lot.
Tom:	We'll be set up for a while. *(laughter)*
Kelvin:	But don't let that stop you if you want to.
Tom:	*(laughter)* That's right.

Kelvin:	You know, Eric Frederickson—
Tom:	Who is in the room, is a very generous—
Kelvin:	Coffee benefactor—
Tom:	Coffee provider, yes.
Kelvin:	You too…
Tom:	*(laughter)*
Kelvin:	You too can get a shout out! If you want to just write some nice things on a bag of whole bean, single origin coffee.
Tom:	That's right.
Kelvin:	And stick it in the mail.
Tom:	As they say, put it on the back of a 20-dollar bill.
Kelvin:	That's car talk.
Tom:	Yeah, that's right.
Kelvin:	That's a whole different show.
Tom:	Alright, so naturally processed coffee—
Kelvin:	Yep.
Tom:	Is better than unnaturally processed, I suppose?
Kelvin:	Not better, different. But do you see the connection, some kind of a connection, and how's the coffee? Did you try it yet?
Tom:	I haven't tried it yet.
Kelvin:	Try it and then see what you think.
Tom:	*(sips coffee)* El Ishco es bueno.
Kelvin:	Muy, muy bueno.
Tom:	Yeah, that's good.
Audience:	*(clapping)*

Kelvin: That's about it. That's about all the Spanish I know. I live in Florida.

Tom: *(laughter)*

Kelvin: I got to work on that.

Tom: Café muy bueno.

Kelvin: Yeah, you say that like every other episode.

Tom: So, alright.

Kelvin: So, do you see the connection?

Tom: Sort of, only because you wrote these notes out.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: Sometimes, Kelvin, your connections, your Kung Fu is better than other times.

Kelvin: It's true. It's so true.

Tom: This one…

Kelvin: It's a little…Let the people judge for themselves, Tom.

Tom: It's a little bit of a stretch.

Kelvin: You just connect the dots.

Tom: Alright, so according to your own notes about the connection—

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: Natural is equivalent to in person.

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Done by hand.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Tom: Artisanal even.

Kelvin: Sure.

Tom: Shall we say.

Kelvin:	Yeah!
Tom:	And the Frontier Set is focused on those desirable future outcomes that we're all striving for.
Kelvin:	That's right.
Tom:	And I guess if we're in person, that's what we're doing right now. We're recording TOPcast in person, in an artisanal way.
Kelvin:	Sure.
Tom:	This is an artisanal podcast, folks.
Kelvin:	Yeah, that means we charge more for it.
Tom:	*(laughter)* That's right.
Kelvin:	Or something like that.
Tom:	You can download it off of Etsy.
Kelvin:	You can feel better about it and charge more for it. Yeah, so we put out a call for topics for this TOPcast live episode and two topics rose neck and neck, might we say, to the top. There were several that we put out there. "Online vs. digital: What are the implications of how we position our work?" That was one topic that was right up there, and then "Predicted future developments in online or blended learning over the next five years." That was the other one, and they were like back and forth, so who can choose? So, we thought we would merge the topics in order to address how the framing and implementation of our online or digital learning field might continue to evolve over the next few years. That's what we're going to talk about.
Tom:	We took the coward's way out.
Kelvin:	*(laughter)*
Tom:	We didn't have to make a decision.
Kelvin:	Okay, way to go, Tom. That's alright.
Tom:	No, it's true though. We did talk about it and felt like these actually were related subjects.
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	So, you want me to start or do you want to start?
Kelvin:	Go ahead. Nobody wants to hear me talk.

Tom:	*(laughter)* So, I would say that maybe number one is the answer to number two, meaning that the predicted future developments in online and blended learning over the next five years is the fact that we seem to be evolving more from an online focus—at least in vernacular—to a digital focus.
Kelvin:	Mhmm.
Tom:	Where online learning is becoming less of an institutional bolt-on and more of something that's becoming engrained into the core fabric of the academic mission of the university or college, and that seems to be manifesting itself in this digital learning term, more so even than online learning. It's definitely been our experience at UCF within the last year and a half.
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	Where we've got a new Division of Digital Learning that includes online learning, and it includes the classroom technology, kind of in a recognition that those boundaries are blurring, and that what happens online is coming into the classroom, especially in our blended environment.
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	And what's happening in the classroom is informed and infused by the online technologies. I think that digital, if I had to predict five years, is probably maybe the answer to the biggest change we might be seeing, and maybe it's a framing change—
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	More than a physical change.
Kelvin:	Well, maybe we use that as a rift. You know, I pasted in here several of the…Along with crowdsourcing and people voting, we actually asked any comments people want to make, and I copy and pasted in several that seemed germane to this digital learning kind of thing.
Tom:	Mhmm.
Kelvin:	So, I thought, maybe we might read a few of these. Maybe we can switch off on some, because I think it just underscores some of the points that you made here. I mean, I'll start with this first one here. So, these were all things that you in the listening community sent in. "The term digital has emerged in the last two years."—You said a year and a half at UCF—"How does the term broaden our scope, or does it? Does it minimize online learning? Does it advance the pedagogy? There are many questions to answer," and that's true.
Tom:	Yes. *(laughter)* You know.
Kelvin:	*(laughter)*

Tom:	I think it depends on the context. You could say it minimizes online learning, but I would say I think it expands online learning in a way that it helps to advance the academic mission in the regular classroom environment. If you're using the LMS, for example, in your face-to-face class to expand the kinds of resources that students have access to, the kinds of interactions. If you're flipping your classroom, I think that all of those online tools are being used in a kind of non-purely-online way to make it more digital. Maybe some of this is also being driven, frankly, by folks in influential positions, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	Which has been using the term digital learning.
Kelvin:	Yep.
Tom:	And others have been adopting it, I think, as a result of that.
Kelvin:	And related to that, terms like digital courseware.
Tom:	Yep.
Kelvin:	Digital adaptive courseware, so forth and so on. But you know, it's interesting because there's another series of statements from another voter that maybe slightly takes issue with what you just said.
Tom:	How dare they?
Kelvin:	So, I'll read this one too since you said that part. "The broader scope of the digital vs. strictly online education arena has appeal because it provides opportunity for leaders in this space to have greater influence or impact on student access and institutional strategy. I've observed less enthusiasm over time for the narrower definition and scope of activity of 'online' education and wonder if others have a similar view." So, that's interesting, you know, like we're not as excited about online but boy, are we excited about digital! You know, which is the framing thing, right?
Tom:	Yeah. Again, I think so much of it is context dependent. If you're at a school that maybe is a traditional liberal arts college that really privileges the in-person, residential experience, I can see not being thrilled about an online kind of model, but a digital framing that informs that on-campus residential experience might resonate more.
Kelvin:	Mhmm.
Tom:	But I don't think that's the case everywhere. I really think it's really dependent upon their own individual institutional circumstances.

Kelvin:	Yeah, and then because we're on a rift, we'll just keep going on this line here. Third person: "Things have blurred. As online faculty and course design experts, how are we relevant and add value in a world where that distinction has blurred significantly?"
Tom:	Sounds like one of those movie trailers. "In a world…" *(laughter)*
Kelvin:	"Where things have blurred." *(laughter)*
Tom:	"Where the definition and scope of online education have blurred."
Kelvin:	Oh, let me go see that movie!
Tom:	Yeah!
Kelvin:	*(laughter)* I'd be the only one there.
Audience:	*(laughter)*
Tom:	*(laughter)*
Kelvin:	Or there'd be at least a handful of other people maybe there too, but you know, then things take—[like] this other statement here—a little more critical turn in practicality of where people live. You want to read that one, that number four?
Tom:	Number four?
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	"There has been a lot of discussion on our campus about 'digital learning' but then not including our distance ed. or instructional technology department as part of that digital initiative, I feel there is a disconnect between online and digital in the eyes of campus leadership. I'm not saying they are the same thing, but I would like to learn how others are dealing with the two terms and possibly helping to educate leadership committees on the role we play." That's a good question. Yeah and also, I mean that does tie in to things we've talked about in the past, which is online learning leaders and departments should not be measuring their success against their own metrics.
Kelvin:	Yeah, right.
Tom:	Measure your success against your boss' metrics, against the president's metrics. How are you advancing student retention or student graduation or student success, those kinds of things? Because online learning—and dare we say digital learning—can impact those things. We've seen that. We've certainly seen it at our institution but others as well. I think that if you tie that effort—whether it's called digital or online—to those bigger problems, you can make yourself a little more relevant. That was the previous one, I think.

Kelvin:	Mhmm.
Tom:	How do we stay relevant?
Kelvin:	Yep.
Tom:	Honestly, I think the term 'digital' is a little broader—
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	A little more inclusive—
Kelvin:	Yeah.
Tom:	Than 'online,' and whether that's good or bad may depend on who you're talking to.
Kelvin:	Yeah. Just so we don't leave out this other one that's here…I think it's interesting and maybe we can use this one as a pivot to kind of get back to maybe some trajectory prognostication but selfishly, self-servingly, I will say that on that last point you made, I just left a group of three provosts talking about the association of Chief Academic Officers Digital Fellows Program.
Tom:	I know it well.
Kelvin:	Yeah, you've been participating in it. We had Casey Greene, during the last year, talk about that project, and I left that group with this question of like, "Hey, the Online Learning Consortium, instructional designers, faculty developers, course builders, and online learning leaders: if you were going to give tips to our community about how they might better engage with their chief academic officers back home who aren't as, you know, innovative forward-thinking leaders as you guys are, what would you say?" You know what they said?
Tom:	What?
Kelvin:	Same stuff you just did.
Tom:	*(laughter)* Good, phew.
Kelvin:	*(laughter)* You know, strategic plan, mission, connect, solve the big problems, RPG, you know, retention, persistence, graduation. That's a couple things.
Tom:	Yeah, okay. Did you read the fifth one?
Kelvin:	Ah, I didn't.
Tom:	We just talked about it.

Kelvin:	Okay, so we'll just say this. So, "at first, I thought of 'digital' as simply 'e-learning' or 'online' with up-to-date fixtures and a new coat of paint, but I'm wondering"—this is a tone of optimism here—"I'm wondering if 'digital' is the best way to move forward with initiatives that recognize and embrace the changes in online learning in recent years."
Tom:	Well, we certainly have. So, for us, 'digital' also now includes the classroom technology.
Kelvin:	Mhmm.
Tom:	The AV technology.
Kelvin:	Right.
Tom:	And that's part of the purview of digital learning. It's not just online anymore, and what we've found by having, I think, a closer working relationship between the online people and the AV people is that we've identified opportunities that I think previously hadn't been there if we hadn't done this structural change. So, for example, we're doing a kind of really interesting partnership on attendance-taking at the university where we're developing an app that students can use to kind of check-in in a classroom by using a QR code that gets projected. You would scan, and we can go into more detail about that if anybody wants, but I don't know if we would have identified the right people and put them together in the way we did if we hadn't broadly defined digital learning in that way and put us all in the same organization.
Kelvin:	No, I think that makes sense. Just to sound a questioning and critical note, Tom, as we head toward the finish line here in a minute. So, online and blended: I know how to deal with that, right? We have instructional designers in our institution who come alongside and partner with our teaching faculty, and it's professionally designed, collaboratively designed, and supported teaching learning experience results from that, right? We have a bunch of folks that come alongside that. But in this broader digital framing, in classroom technologies and so forth, do we risk moving into a—dare I say—a morass of less designed experiences and more just technology-infused? Or are we looking to technologies to—dare I say—idiot-proof, teacher-proof our digital experiences? Is that a legitimate threat?
Tom:	Oh, I think anywhere where technology is easy to implement, that's a legitimate threat. I still say this about the learning management system. I think our biggest risk is outrunning our quality supply lines.
Kelvin:	Mhmm.
Tom:	I think it's real easy to just create a new section in your learning management system and say, "Go teach it" without preparing the faculty and doing all of that logistical and hard work of preparing them to be successful. That's the hard part. The easy part is creating a new section in the LMS, and I think the same thing happens in a classroom. So, another area, I think, that's been fruitful for us in

having this new organizational structure under digital learning umbrella is in active learning. It's a big push at UCF as it is at a lot of other schools to have active learning in the classroom. Well, that now becomes part of our blended learning faculty development. It's created new partnerships with our Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, who's responsible for the classroom instruction, and it's created opportunities for our instructional designers to work with the AV folks, to talk about what kind of technology would be good in these active learning rooms. How can it bring in the online world? And your point about instructional designers, definitely it's a resource issue, but I recall our previous provost, who's now our president, having a thought experiment where it says—

Kelvin: I remember this.

Tom: Well, what if every faculty member in the university had an instructional designer for every class, not just the ones teaching online? And I had to sit down.

Kelvin: You went ooh. Yeah, what if that happens?

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: *(laughter)*

Audience: *(laughter)*

Tom: But it's the right question because, you know, people teaching face-to-face need support and pedagogical design and how to align objectives with assessments and activities just like everybody else teaching online. We just happened to have designed it, and frankly what we can afford is to provide it to faculty who are teaching online. But if we want to do it right, provide that kind of support for faculty who are teaching face-to-face as well, and if that's the case, you know, it's never just a technology solution.

Kelvin: Right

Tom: I'll quote Joel Hartman again.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: I've done it before on this podcast many times.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: That adding technology to any sort of environment without changing the process just adds cost and frustration. You know, you have to change the process around this new technology, and I think instruction design around even classroom-based technology is a fundamental requirement if it's going to be successful.

Kelvin:	No, I think that's good. So, what we're saying, right, is you're saying the two things neck and neck. One answers the other, so the future is more digital. Digital is broader. Broader isn't necessarily not-designed or non-intentional or teacher-proofed. We hope to bring all the affordances of online and blended in our rich history to this broader, more inclusive digital learning future.
Tom:	Yeah. *(laughter)* What you said, yeah. And this is, you know, guess it just worked out on this one that you were sort of the questioner and I was the answerer, but you know, hey—
Kelvin:	That's how we roll.
Tom:	This is Tom's view of the world.
Kelvin:	That's right.
Tom:	So, we'll see if anybody agrees.
Kelvin:	I like it. Let's go with that.
Tom:	But yeah, I do agree with that. I think so.
Kelvin:	Yeah, okay. Well, I did write this. I mean, that might have been a better bottom line to take away, but I did write this one here thinking that maybe. Let's see if this matches anything that we just talked about, Tom, and see if you agree with this one. So, we continue to live in fast-moving times and today's digital learning technologies continue to accelerate—watch what I did there—accelerate the pace of change.
Tom:	*(laughter)*
Kelvin:	However, we have the opportunity to shape the direction of change at each of our institutions. How we frame our work and where we invest our innovation efforts will have at least some bearing on where our future leads.
Tom:	Amen, brother. Preach. That's true.
Kelvin:	There it is, alright.
Tom:	I think it's true.
Kelvin:	Okay, that works for me if it works for you. That's good, and hey, look at that. We're right on—
Tom:	Right on time.
Kelvin:	Right on time.
Tom:	Should we do this little plug here?

Kelvin: Why don't you do that little plug there?

Tom: So, keep in mind, everyone in the room and everybody listening at home, the entire catalog of TOPcast episodes is available in the TOPcast website. Older episodes may have faded from Apple Podcasts and maybe other platforms, so each episode page contains a transcript, Twitter summary, and carefully curated, read more about it, topical links, and that can be found at http://topcast.online.ucf.edu. Check it out. We would love to hear feedback. There's a way to comment.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: Or email us.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: Or you can send us an audio file, or we always take coffee contributions.

Kelvin: That's right. topcast@ucf.edu would get us an email. So, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya!