

My First 90 Days and Beyond

By Kelvin Thompson, Ed.D.

The First 90 Days

You may remember that I committed to “90 Conversations in 90 Days” when accepting the new role of Vice Provost for Online Strategy and Teaching Innovation (VPOSTI). Between my first day at the University of Louisville on January 17, 2023 and calendar Day 90 (April 16), by the numbers, I had 91 unique conversations with 101 unique, unduplicated individuals. (As of Work Day 90, May 23, those numbers have increased to 156 conversations with 167 individuals.) Looking at total conversations, including follow-ups and recurring one-on-one meetings, etc., I've had 328 conversations since arriving on the job. That means my calendar has been filled with conversations.

People ask me all the time, “Are you settling-in?” And I like to say, “Well, ‘settling-in’ is more journey than destination.” But there were two milestones that I recognized during conversations with others. The first milestone arose because I developed a practice of noting the day number (e.g., “This is Day 37”), and at one point I was in a meeting and I said, “This is Day X... *I think.*” The person I was meeting with said, “Well, that's probably an indication of a new phase if you're losing track of the days.” The second milestone occurred more recently when I thought to myself, “There are a couple of things I just really need to produce, but I don't have any time to do so because meeting, meeting, meeting, meeting, meeting.” I realized that when the conversations are starting to impede the flow of actually doing a thing, that is probably the beginning of a new phase.

I'm not stopping the meetings with people just because I'm now through the First 90 Days. I intend to continue reaching out and having initial conversations and follow-up conversations. Some of you might wonder, though, “Why would you undertake 90 Conversations in 90 Days?”

I've said to almost everyone I've met that after nearly 24.5 years at my former institution, I know what it is to have fairly wide and deep institutional contextual knowledge. I know the value contextual understanding has in carrying out our work and getting things done. And I know I do not have that kind of contextual knowledge at the University of Louisville. While it would be really easy to come into a place like UofL and just start “accomplishing things,” that can be foolish without understanding institutional context. I'm determined not to make dumb decisions unwittingly. (I might choose to take actions that others find disruptive,

but I'm committed to doing so purposefully.) To me, then, these conversations I've been having are all about learning, building a foundation, listening, making sense, and processing, to try to understand the "why." This kind of context might shape "what" I pursue, but it is more likely to inform the "how" of implementation.

What have I asked and discussed when I've had these conversations? While each person and conversation has been unique, I've tried to include two open invitations for the current conversation or at any point in the future: 1) who else should I be meeting with (either because of their unique perspective or their deep institutional contextual knowledge)? and 2) as you think about "online strategy" and "teaching innovation" in general, a) what's working well? b) what's working less well? and c) what specific recommendations would you make for changes?

As an aside, some people have wanted to talk about the Delphi Center, and that has been fine. But I've tried to keep the conversation framed more broadly, with the entire institution in view, because my purview is broader than the Delphi Center. It's about how do we as an institution accomplish something meaningful related to online strategy and teaching innovation? How do we use the resources of the Delphi Center and the resources of other partners as means to an end, a shared vision and a common goal related to more students having a more successful, life-transformative higher ed experience?

Some general reactions, some themes and observations, arising from these 160+ conversations so far include: the UofL community is warm and welcoming. Many faculty and staff members have had positive comments about specific individuals within and the valued work of the Delphi Center. Some people want to return to previous approaches to funding online learning. Other people want to be clear that we're on the right path now and shouldn't seek to change it. Harder to surface, not immediately apparent, have been what I think of as "pockets of disbelief" in the potential of online learning to contribute meaningfully to the work of the university in ways that benefit students. I've heard President Schatzel speak of her observations of UofL as highly decentralized as an institution. I would agree with that. While that isn't necessarily a problem in and of itself, if we only work in our own unit-level silos we can miss opportunities to optimize more globally at the institutional level. Further, if we lack an institution-wide perspective it limits our ability to accomplish things at scale, and it limits efficiencies for students.



Figure 1. Vision slide for digital learning from candidate site visit.

Moving Forward with Transformative Digital Learning

When I was a finalist candidate for UofL’s new VPOSTI position during mid-fall 2022, I shared a slide (see above) in response to a request to characterize my “vision” for digital learning at UofL. It is still broadly relevant today. When I look to the horizon, I aspirationally seek an environment in which there is a high value placed on learning, a high view of design and teaching, and a shared vision for continuous improvement, where all of those elements thrive culturally in the institution. Arising from all of that, I seek to champion an ecosystem of hybridity that provides flexible pathways for student access and success. To me, that all represents a view of online/blended/digital learning as a “lever” to affect positive and meaningful change for students.

When thinking about how to characterize my contributions to UofL’s positive future with digital teaching and learning, I’ve embraced the recommendation suggested to me of “moving forward” as a mantra and a metaphor. “Moving forward” suggests progress, a focus on betterment in the future. However, recently I had a small epiphany that “We can’t move forward until we’re first pointed in the same direction.”

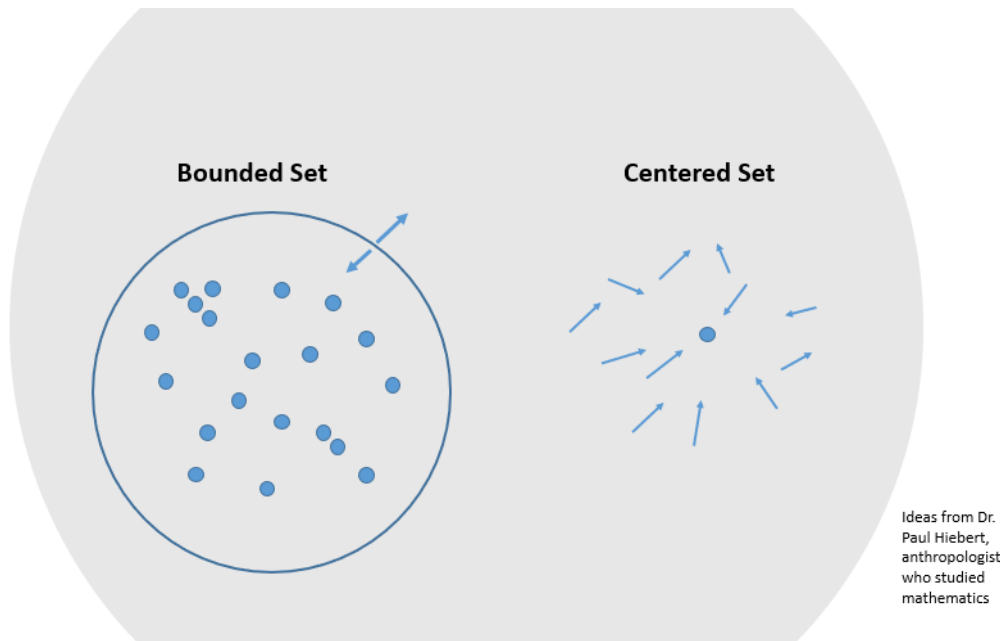


Figure 2. Illustration of Paul Hiebert’s “Bounded-Set vs. Centered Set” construct.

There is value in identifying those who are already moving in roughly the same direction. These individuals surface as those who care about the things we care about rather than identifying people solely based upon whether they hold to the same partisan identities (e.g., pro-online vs. pro-in-person). (See depiction of Hiebert’s construct of Bounded Set vs. Centered-Set Thinking in the image above.) There is value in journeying together, collaborating, and helping the other person(s) be successful. As Alan Loy McGinnis (1985) has put it, “If they are going anywhere near where you want to go, climb on other people’s bandwagons” (p. 10). Or as the proverb carved into the wall of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

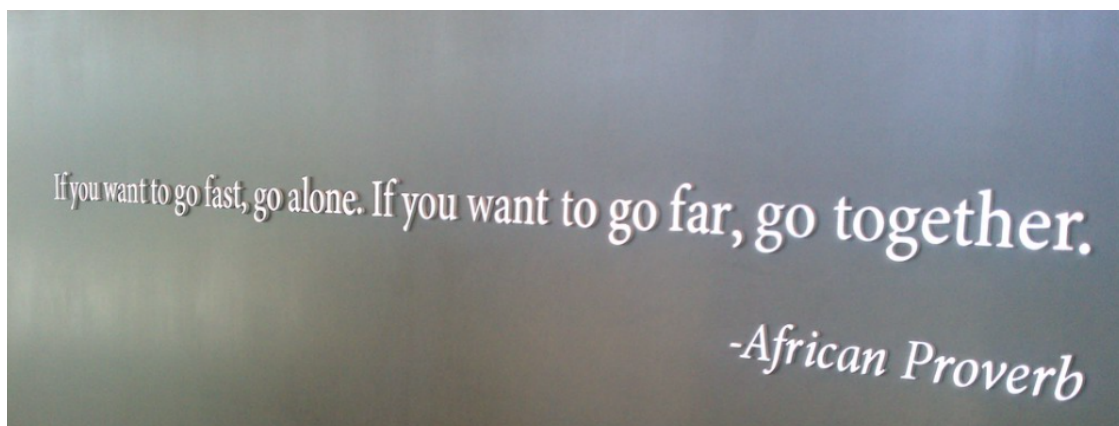


Figure 3. Photo of wall proverb at the Gates Foundation.

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When looking for potential partners who are already pursuing a similar trajectory as that to which I aspire, I sometimes share a version of the following: “I’m trying to contribute to societal transformation through access to a high-quality higher education... with online/digital design and teaching as a lever.” While I’m headed all the way to the end of that sentence (the recognition of the strategic value of digital learning), most in higher education will share a commitment to the first section of the sentence (the societal value of higher ed) or even the second section (increasing access). We can at least “go together” for a while.

To increase the number of people at UofL who recognize digital design/teaching as a lever that contributes to significant student, institutional, and societal benefit, it is important to be transparent about how we are doing now and how we can improve. This means being grounded in data about the efficacy of our efforts (e.g., student retention/success rates, time to graduation, etc.) for all students (e.g., under-represented minoritized students, Pell-eligible students, First Generation students, etc.). This also means redoubling quality assurance efforts. We must ensure that design, teaching, and learning are of the highest quality in all online and other courses offered by the university. To that end, increasing the number of faculty who are well-prepared for digital design/teaching and increasing the number of high quality online courses available to UofL students is paramount.

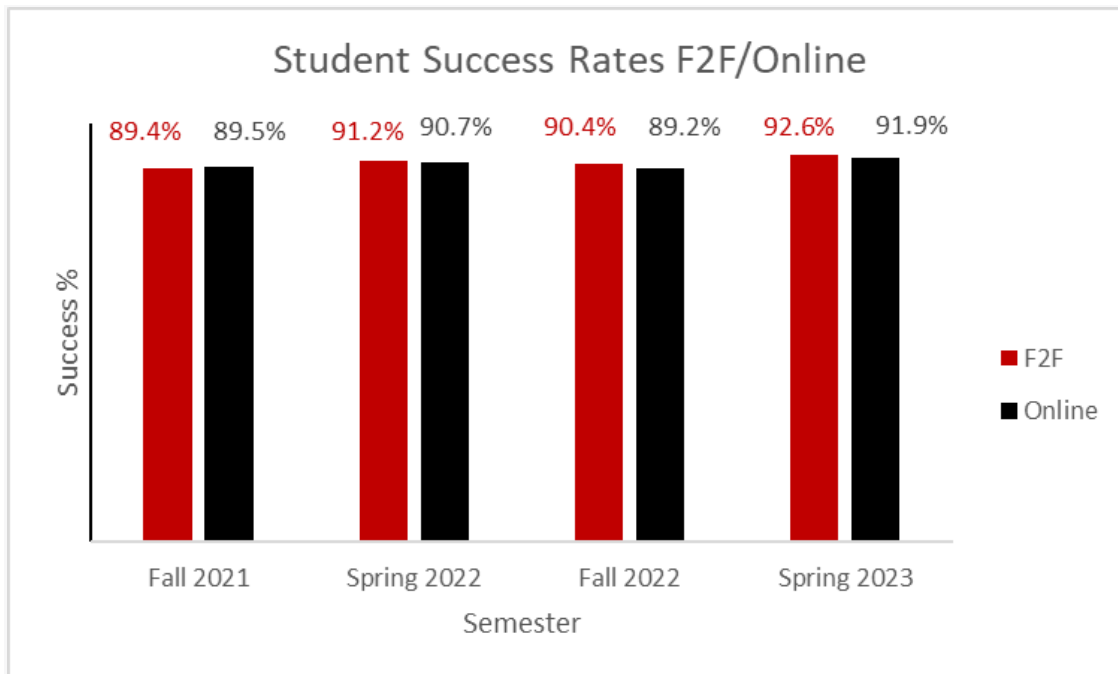


Figure 4. Data on digital learning efficacy: Success rates.

One example of aligning these efforts is the summer 2023 three-week faculty summer short course pilot at UofL that we're calling “Digital Teaching Accelerator.” We're using

one-time budget surplus, mainly salary savings, to invest in faculty. Those who participate and complete the three-week program and schedule an online course to be taught will receive a \$1,000 payment. (The first \$500 is awarded upon program completion, and the remaining \$500 is disbursed once the redesigned online course is scheduled). As a result of this program, we will increase the number of digitally-prepared faculty and increase the number of strategically-redesigned online courses that deans believe have the potential to affect student retention and success.

We have to be pointed in the same direction before we can move forward. I've talked about influencing the direction we're all pointing. What does "moving forward" look like?

Following is another slide excerpted from my finalist candidate presentation to the university community in October 2022. Despite its non-context-refined state, it provides some clues to initiatives that can benefit students through leveraging digital design and teaching. Foremost among these is providing high-quality digital course options from which students can choose flexibly based on their needs. Today's undergraduates have competing time demands which can hinder education progression. (I've spoken with non-online program students who have taken online courses *exclusively* for multiple semesters in order to balance school, work, and co-curricular university experiences. Nearly half (45%) of UofL undergraduates have taken a mix of online and in-person courses in fall and spring semesters over the past two years.) But we must learn to reframe our expectations of who we see as prospective students. For instance, we have the opportunity to invite Louisville employers and their team members into a lifelong relationship with UofL, what Dede and Richards (2020) have called "the 60-year curriculum." Using digital methods to repackaging curricular offerings in smaller, more relevant bursts allows us to serve our metropolitan area better *and* attract more (so-called) "non-traditional" students.

Possible Opportunities Benefitting Students

- A robust ecosystem of digital course options from which students can choose flexibly based on their needs and preferences
 - Fully online programs
 - Fully online courses
 - Hybrid/blended courses
- Community-responsive alternative packaging of learning opportunities
 - Credit/non-credit pathways
 - Microcredentials
- An emphasis on a *lifelong relationship* between university/community

Figure 5. Opportunities slide from candidate site visit.

Informed by the many conversations I've had since arriving at UofL in January 2023, thus far, I've contextualized additional examples of "moving forward" with digital design/teaching as a lever, including: pursuing focused access/services outreach to existing high school students and adult learners in the "education deserts" (Hillman, 2019) of Kentuckiana and other priority areas of Louisville (e.g., the West End). Strategic focus of well-designed online courses to serve current students can include student-centered and course design-centered efforts. For instance, the latter might involve online design and support of higher-need courses (e.g., high enrollment, high DFW, etc.), while an example of the former might be reaching out to specific students who've missed many class sessions with the suggestion of considering an online course section. Finally, many faculty with whom I've spoken have suggested the student benefit of an explicit institutionally-supported high-quality blended learning course modality. The research literature certainly suggests that well-designed blended courses result in metrics that outperform both exclusively in-person and exclusively online courses.

The Road Ahead

I've challenged the leadership team of the Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning to think hard about how we can marshal Delphi resources in partnership with other university stakeholders to most effectively use digital design/teaching as a lever. We've identified three priority areas in alignment with the university's 2023-2025 strategic plan through which we will focus our efforts over time:

- Grow the ecosystem of digital course sections at UofL to ensure flexible scheduling options (“hybridity”) for students
- Expand access-oriented digital initiatives to recruit a wider variety of potential learners to UofL (e.g., non-credit to credit in the employer community; outreach in “education deserts;” etc.)
- Focus UofL course design/teaching efforts to ensure maximum positive impact on students (e.g., success, retention, satisfaction, etc.)

I have found it to be a truism that we often overestimate what we can get done in the short term and underestimate what we can get done in the longer term. These priorities will take time to yield mature results. It will take even longer to foster an institutional culture that recognizes the strategic power of continuous improvement in course design and teaching to affect learning. And the ultimate vision of societal transformation is a very long game indeed. However, we can act now in alignment with these longer-term goals.

Achieving something significant takes focus — alignment between the everyday work and the eventual goal. A principle I’ve been thinking about and talking about since arriving at UofL is “fewer things better.” Members of the Delphi Leadership Team and I have been meeting to discuss the book *Quit: The Power of Knowing When to Walk Away* (Duke, 2022) to help us think through how to best identify activities that we should discontinue or refocus in order to better align with our strategic priorities. If we’re not “saying no” to some very good things, then we are not able to “say yes” to the best, most strategic things. Of course, we seek to set clear targets for metrics that help us advance in the most strategic manner (e.g., x% increase in proportion of instructors-of-record with a design/teaching credential from Delphi or comparable). But we should also pursue optimizing all of our aligned work so that is most effective (e.g., # of classes taught in the Teaching Innovation Learning Lab (TILL) by first-time instructors; # of first-time instructional design consultations, etc.). It is my hope that we will lay groundwork in the remainder of my first year at UofL for further increasing access, offering flexible course options to retain students, and positively affecting student outcomes in all the courses influenced through the Delphi Center.

Collecting data and being transparent about our progress toward our metric targets, and being willing to adjust our efforts accordingly will be key to our first year together. I have been vocal since my time as a candidate for this VPOSTI position that UofL cannot lead in online strategy or teaching innovation without sustainable, growth-oriented funding rather than only relying on the “lag” funding of the university budget model. Demonstrating evidence of our capacity to contribute to the university’s

strategic imperatives will be important in justifying the establishment of a complementary approach to sustainably funding our collective work in this area.

We seek to make a difference in the lives of our current students and to expand opportunity to potential students and non-academic learners in Louisville, throughout Kentucky, and Beyond. Our online/digital work is a lever that can enrich lives and livelihoods. That vision keeps me coming back every day, and I look forward to working alongside the UofL community to make that vision a reality.

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