Episode 16: Dr. Tanya Joosten

# KL: Katie Linder TJ: Tanya Joosten KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode sixteen.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On today’s episode, I’m joined by Dr. Tanya Joosten, the director of eLearning Research and Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) where she works to guide strategic eLearning efforts at the campus, state, and national levels, to develop innovative programming for the UWM campus, and to lead a team of researchers to advance the field of eLearning. She is also the co-director of the National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements supported by the U.S Department of Education. Dr. Joosten’s efforts have been highlighted in many national news and media outlets and have led to her involvement in planning for the future of education, including the State of Wisconsin Superintendent’s Digital Learning Advisory Council, NMC Horizon Project Higher Ed Advisory Board, EDUCAUSE Evolving Technologies Steering Committee, and EDUCAUSE IT Status committee. Tanya is also the author of *Social Media for Educators*, available from Jossey-Bass.

Thanks for joining me, Tanya.

**TJ**: Well thanks for having me.

**KL**: One of your major initiatives right now is this national research center for distance education and technological advancements, kind of a mouthful. You also call it DETA, or DETA. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

**TJ**: We launched this center, I think through funding from US department of education, typically in 2014, now. So October 2014 is when we received the funding and immediately lunched the efforts for the center. And so the main focus of the center, I think through the awarding of our proposal is to conduct research around distance education and different technological advancement. And specifically we’re not; you know distance education has lots of different meanings. When we talk about distance education we’re talking about blended learning, we’re talking about online learning, slip learning, we’re also talking about confidence based education which was a priority preference of the funding that we received.

**KL**: One of the things, I think I should mention for full disclosure is that some of the research at the research unit here, at Oregon state that I lead, is funded through DETA and through your research center and it’s been so fun to work with you so far. I’m wondering if you can tell us a little bit about what lead you to seek out the kind of funding to support distance education research. What kind of moved you in that direction?

**TJ**: Absolutely, we have a history of securing for funding at EWN for a different, what we would call innovation projects, and teaching and learning with technology throughout the years. Some of that funding has come through UW system; some of that funding has come from external foundations and so forth. And I had just been moved into this position that the struggles had created because we felt that, one these were my strengths, and two this was an area that we really needed to be focusing one. So we needed a concerted effort at our university to examine E-Learning, the different factors that influence e-learning, and all of those sorts of things. But also we knew that there was sort of this development aspect so that we needed to be networking with folks at a national and international level. We needed to be looking for collaborative research outlets. We also wanted to look to bring in funding so that we had a greater capacity to actually make this happen. And so it was really interesting because the fall for proposals that came out from US department of Ed was the first of its kind; we haven’t seen the US Department of Ed fund distance education research in this way or launch another center for distance education research. And only one institution we knew were going to get awarded with money. Now in writing the grant, which was really interesting, is that for years we have been doing research around blended learning, and online learning, and different technologies in the classroom such as clickers, and virtual worlds, and social media, and how those sort of influence student learning. But this we knew throughout the year that there needed to be sort of this greater consistency in how we approach researching blend and online as a field. And so, in writing the proposal, it was sort of a need that we knew that needed to be filled. We knew that we needed a common language, which I refer to often where multiple institutions could use standardized methodology and research models, and implementation, and have someone shared meaning on different variables, and measures, and those sorts of things. A real key piece of conducting research across different institutions, with making sure that we sort of had a similar approach into how we are going to do that, otherwise the research ends up very fragmented; everybody is sort of studying different pieces and it doesn’t really come together and make a whole. It’s not bringing any coherent to the field which we knew we really needed. So that was really the foundation of the proposal, with one making sure that we all were speaking a similar language, making sure that we can conduct rigorous empirical research at multiple different institutions, increasing our ability to generalize our results, and then doing that, making sure that we have some funding and resources available to get other institutions on board and doing research. Now at Oregon State they are so lucky to have you and your team, and we know lots of institutions still have not done what UWN and what Oregon State has done in building this capacity to do research. We also knew that we would have to give people different tools and different place of support in order to do research at their institutions. In particular institutions which don’t necessarily have a focus on research. Those were the real keys in our proposal, is making sure that we had a common language, and that came out in the research tool kit which we disseminated and published last year. Making sure that we were able to build capacity at different institutions for doing this research and that came through the sub branch award that we had, which you mentioned that Oregon State was a recipient of those. And coming together this year, we’re collecting data and hopefully as well, we’ll have some cross institutional analysis and have some findings that will be generalizable to all different sorts of institutions. But also we have almost a dozen research models that are being used right now at the different institutions but other schools can go ahead and take, and implement on their campuses. So we really helped proposed this coherent body of research throughout the decade.

**KL**: One of the things that I’ve really enjoyed seeing that’s coming out of data, that’s coming out of the tool kit, that’s coming out of some conversations that you’ve been leading at various technology conferences, is really increasing the literacy; the research literacy of the people who are working with online and hybrid blended flipped courses, but that may not have gone through like a PhD program were they received instruction on how to do research. And so I’m thinking about people, like instructional designers, or technologists, or folks who are clearly incredibly engaged in online learning, and student success in technology enhanced or online environments, but maybe don’t feel like they have the tools to contribute to the research. And data really is offering a way to learn about those tools and to be a partner in some of these research projects, which I think, is really great.

**TJ**: yeah we’ve been really excited to be able to engage that audience because lots of times at institutions, especially when they are starting out and their incorporation of technology and their programming in their curriculum, it usually starts with the building of that capacity by hiring instructional technologists and instructional designers. And some of these folks don’t necessarily have research backgrounds but those are the folks that are most likely going to be planning and administering research to understand the efficacy of technology and enhancing teaching and learning. So that was part of including, so in the research initiative, you know we have a student survey packet with an array of different survey instruments for all different kinds of variables and measures that people can implement on their campus and even if you do not have this capacity to do multi-varied analysis or advance statistics. Even having the descriptive data can be very helpful for different institutions and understanding the impacts of different technologies, or blended, and online courses, and programming, and course design. So and through, not only are we producing the tool kit as you had eluted to, myself and different members of our team are going to different conferences in the US and actually internationally, to talk about how do we plan for research? What are different things that we can utilize in the toolkit to make that a reality on our campuses. And we’re looking forward to this year taking that a step further. It’s really more; it’s far beyond providing schools and capacity to do research. It’s really building a collaborative effort in this year and in future years, so that we can advance the research in this field.

**KL**: that’s is so exciting; we will definitely be linking to the data website so that people can learn more about these upcoming initiatives and then sharing also obviously links to the toolkit as well. We are going to take a brief break, when we come back; we’ll continue to talk with Tonya about producing research with planning a pipeline for future research and funding, back in a moment.

# Segment 2:

**KL**: Tanya one of the things that I really admire about the work that you do is how much you kind of juggle all these different, pretty big projects at one time and you have, you know you are producing research but you are also planning for the future and always kind of looking for the next funding possibility. So I loved to spend just a little bit of time talking about, what are kind of some strategies you use for doing the current work but also really looking ahead to the future. The first thing I would say is, to what degree do you find that current projects that you are working on, are kind of naturally growing or developing into future projects, or are you finding yourself kind of really doing a lot discrete kinds of projects.

**TJ**: I think that, would have been really interesting is that when we wrote the grant proposal for data, we knew that that was sort of one piece of it. And so you’re consistently, as you are coming into contact with other individuals, you’re caring about work that people are doing, you are at conferences, you’re talking with colleagues. I’m just one of those people that consistently taking in information, I took a part of being social sciences, and then thinking about how does this information play into be it future path, or the data research center, or just the path for research in general and higher Ed when it comes to digital learning, or technology enhanced learning in distance education and those sorts of things.

**KL**: So as you’re going to different conferences, and meeting with people, and meeting with vendors, talking with colleagues, how are you kind of keeping track of all of this information? Is it just something you are keeping in your brain? Are you taking notes? How are you kind of thinking about where to move in the next direction?

**TJ**: Well the first thing I should probably clarify and I’m sure many people always know this is I am extremely passionate about what I do. So the idea that through research we can improve teaching and learning in higher Ed, that we can help faculty and instructors s make better decisions about how they are structuring their classrooms, that we can increase access for students by offering more technology enhanced programming. And it’s not just offering them access, its offering them access to probably better quality learning than a lot of the traditional face-to-face classrooms that we see are basically forces that we have on campus. I am probably much more enthusiastic than some others in this area. This definitely isn’t my job; this is my attachment in my life. And when connecting with other people, I think there are different ways that I reflect and keep track. One of the ways that I reflect and keep track is through twitter. So sometimes I can be having face-to-face conversations or I can be listening to a session and then I can start creating digital archives with my thoughts, and reflections, and resources by using twitter. I strongly encourage anybody who’s not on twitter to get on twitter because it definitely helps you build that digital archive. A really fantastic, unintended consequence that other colleagues, that aren’t there in the face-to-face, can, start sharing with me or reflecting on my thoughts. Or next thing you know, we are having a really stimulating discussion about something that happened. I also blog, so blogging is a great way for me to bring some coherency to my idea and so usually after a conference, or after some amount of time when I’m sort of putting pieces together, I’ll put together a blog post. I also use it as a great way to share out information to others no matter how small or how large. I think those are two really great digital flows or social media that help me sort of keep track of some of that actually what would be implicit or tacit knowledge and make it more explicit. So I can revisit it and other people can engage in those conversations with me. I am not a paper, pencil sort of person; you’ll rarely probably see me take notes on paper. Most of the time, I don’t even have a pen in my purse. I am part of this web casts that me and a few of my colleagues have been doing called, Women who Wine in Education. We are actually going to have our third episode of that coming up. But one of the things that we talked about is the unit ability or an organization’s ability to start taking advantage of some of the reasons why we even do online learning and start substantiating staff throughout time and space, and creating mechanisms so that we can work at a distance anytime, anywhere. And so my team and I, obviously there’s some better locally here in Milwaukee; some folks are not. Some of our research partners like yourselves are on the other side of the country. I think it’s good for us and our units to start thinking about, how can we create digital archives of our thought areas for us to reflect. How can use collaborative physical tools, moving throughout time and space to connect with each other and continue working on projects. And I know, you know, we right now are in a Google doc working on grant proposals and so it’s great that we have these tools and we can take advantage of some of the things that we are seeing that works so well and be able to apply them.

**KL**: These are some great suggestions and tools. We will definitely link in the show notes to your twitter handle, your blog, and also to the Women who Wine webcasts that you mentioned, which is great. I definitely seen the first episode and I look forward to the future ones as well. I’m wondering Tanya, if you can talk a little bit about how you find appropriate funding mechanisms for the work that you are doing, and I’m thinking about grants that you might decide to apply for but also maybe even working with vendors.

**TJ**: yeah, so first when we started this, you know obviously we were looking for government grants and so we got really lucky. Like I said, this grant for the data research center was very unique. Sadly congress did not fund the second half of it. So if you know a congressman, we’d love an advocate to help us get the second funding of that. There’s a great website on the US department of education that shares their forecast funding. So more or less, what’s been improved by congress that will come through and we’ll have a competition. And so, there are different branches of the US department of Education, so this was a sixty grant for the fund of a secondary education. We also pay attention to the institute of educational sciences and then also NSF, the national science foundation has some grants, for example the cyber learning. This kind of work is sort of unique and it’s sometimes really hard to find people to fund your ideas because usually they have very specific things that they will fund and they want to fund them in very specific ways or are favoring a certain methodology. That can be a real challenge but you sort of got to go, you got to get out there and you got to hustle. I’ve been very lucky to work with some great vendors lately who have heard me speak; you like my ideas, and actually believe the research is really important. So that’s sort of the development side of my job; is to connect with folks and to find folks who are interested in supporting the research that we want to do. Now some of the vendors fund directly, some of the vendors use their connection to help us secure funding and so this is very new for us this year, but this has been a great area for us to not only get financial support from vendors, or to use their network, but actually having conversations with vendors because our research needs to be informing the development of these technologies. And we also need to understand the vendor road map, when we’re talking about researching, teaching, and learning, and recommending effective practices in the use of some of these technologies. So I think those are some real key pieces by having this relationship with vendors. Now there’s a third area which is the foundation, and so you are sort of, honestly you are out there sort of screaming from the mountain top; like, “this is our research and this is what we are doing, and this is more research we want to do. Please help us and find our work interesting.” It could come from a foundation, again a foundation tend to be very specific about where they want to invest their money and research. So, you just sort of move through it and hope that; my philosophy is I just do really great work, I try to do great work very day, and I’m very passionate about this and I just hope that vendors and foundation in government agencies realize that and help us support this research that’s so needed in higher Ed; not only across the country but across the globe.

**KL**: Well I think one of the things you’ve brought up which is really key in something I found particularly about educational research related to technology, is often times when you’re looking for funding, you really have to forecast in advance what is coming around the corner and then some of these calls come out and you have a very short amount of time to respond. So, if you aren’t kind of up and running with a research endeavor to begin with, it can be very hard to compete for some of the funds that are becoming available for Ed technology research.

**TJ**: You know and I should mention specifically that, a lot of the calls come out in the summer. When the data call came out for the data research center, we had one month and my whole team and I. I mean we were funneled eighteen hour days to get the different; it’s not just writing the proposal that’s one piece of it. It’s getting your partners together, to budget together, all of these sorts of pieces. There’s a lot even; even to just the actual submitting of the proposal, and of itself can take a couple days to do. And so you’re right, all of a sudden you’re focus could change tomorrow. A proposal could come out, a call for a proposal and next thing you know, we have to drop everything pretty much and just invest in that for the next few weeks.

**KL**: That team based approach, I think is really necessary, it’s hard to do this when you’re not connected or networked, and really understanding what’s going on in the field. So I appreciate those comments very much. We are going to take another brief break. When we come back we are going to talk a little bit about the role of data in instructional technology platforms. We’ll be back in a minute.

# Segment 3:

**KL**: Tanya I know something that you are pretty passionate about right now, is the role of data in instructional technology platforms and particularly how learning management system data can be merged with other kinds of data, to tell us more about how students learn online or in web enhanced environments. Can you tell me a little bit more about projects that you are kind of working on that are in this area or even just what lead you to being interested in this topic?

**TJ**: yeah I think there are a couple of things there. So through the years, we know that there is a good amount of data in our instructional technology platform; whether that would be learning management systems that are out there, or content management systems that are available. Also we see now these new adaptive learning platforms which are becoming really popular and so they create these technologies and we know that there is data in them. Some people will call it analytics, some people will call it data, sometimes I just call them there’s little digital artifacts there that tell us something about students and instructors behavior. This has always been really interesting to me as a social sciences and what would a data that are in these systems and how can we look at those data as indicators of student’s behavior and instructor behavior and understand how those influence becomes students success. You know students learning, its student’s performance such as grades, you know students ability to complete a course and so forth. And I think that this is something primarily that has eluted us in higher Ed. Now we saw this sort of movement with these analytics and all of this sort of data that could help us predict either a student at risk or student at risk. And to me it was sort of like the equation wasn’t complete. These are really small indicators of data that people are pulling out and I am more specifically want to understand the complexity of the instructor course design, and the instructional characteristics, the instructor behaviors, the student behaviors. And let’s identify those behaviors that we know are taking place by successful students in certain courses, to help us better and form what we are doing. And so there’s been a little bit of a challenge in doing that. These technology platforms and the folks that work in these vendors are all data scientists or a computer scientists. A lot of these folks don’t have a background necessarily in learning theory or social theory. And so when they approach these things, they approach them without sort of the fact that lots of us has had or the familiarity with the theory and the research. And so us as learning scientists and social sciences sometimes looking at this data, it’s hard for some of us to make sense of it because there is so much data being captured by the system. So what I hope to do in the future is to have conversations with social scientists and learning scientists, and data scientists, and practitioners in the field, instructional technologists, instructional designers, faculty, and instructors, to come together and figure out what data in these back horns is actually useful to helping us understanding student success. But I think we really need to come together, the vendors and the different scientists and we need to really truly understand, how can we measure engagement, let’s say through these instructional technology platforms. But most likely we are not going to be able to fully measure engagement through the platform and therefore we have surveys that help us gather information from the students and so they can report on their perception of engagement but then we can merge that data in from the data we get from the instructional technology platform and then we have a more complete idea of really what engagement is in helping us understand student success. I know I got a little there but I’m super excited about this next phase.

**KL**: Well it’s definitely a really great example. I think engagement really points out a couple of things, I mean one is that we come to these research questions from different perspectives and so we have these diverse perspectives that are all coming to the table together, which can be super beneficial to the research. But also can create some frustration on the side and some challenging conversation about how to move forward. But also I think you’ve really point out something that I just continue to see over and over again which is the kind of crucial role that collaboration plays in these kinds of research endeavors; where you’re not going to find one researcher who has the expertise and all the tools that are needed to get at some of these complex questions, particularly around teaching and learning. You really need to have a team approach to make sure that you can bring all the different methodologies and you know statistical tools and all those different kinds of things to the table and that seems like something that you found in your work thus far.

**TJ**: yes, absolutely and I think that you’re right about that, That collaboration is key and we’ve been very lucky already with our data efforts to, because of networking has done through the years, to reach out to some vendors. For example, Desire to Learn is interested in collaborating with us on this research. McGraw Hill is interested in collaborating with us on this research. And also Blackboard has attended our data summit that we held last year as well as well as to be a part of the developing the research tool kit. It’s great that we have vendors at the table. I’ve met with data scientists from several of the team and I’m looking forward to securing funding, actually so that we can have more concerted efforts to build these collaboration between practitioners, researchers, scientists and vendors; to help solve some of these key issues moving forward.

**KL**: Well Tonya, I’m looking forward to seeing where this goes. I think you clearly have gained some momentum with these projects. They are doing such incredibly important work. So, thank you so much for taking some time to share a little bit about what you are working on with us today.

**TJ**: Yeah thanks so much for having me, this has been great.

**KL**: …And thanks to the listeners joining us for this week’s episode of *Research in Action.* I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

Show notes with information regarding topics discussed in each episode, as well as the transcript for each episode, can be found at the *Research in Action* website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL**: In this bonus clip for episode 16 of the Research in Action Podcasts, Doctor Tanya Joosten discusses her experience with creating a virtual community, take a listen.

**TJ**: So we are working on building a virtual community, where people can connect. I hope to br announcing very soon, a partnership with several different organizations were we’ll be having research meetings on distance education and technological advancements at each of the primary conferences. We can come together and share the research that we are doing. We can talk about things that work really well for us and we can also help each other problem solve challenges that we’re having. And also figure an area for us to come together to collaborate on research projects and potential grant opportunities that arrives. So, I’m really looking forward to this fall; having some of the findings coming out from the past institutional studies, launching this virtual community where people can come and connect with others that are doing research in this area, and actually having that face-to-face component at several of the conferences this fall and next spring where we can come together and connect with each other.

**KL**: You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode sixteen of the Research in Action podcasts with Doctor Tanya Joosten discussing her experience creating a virtual community. Thanks for listening.

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