Episode 22: What do you wish you had known about research from the beginning?

**KL:** You’re listening to *Research in Action*, episode twenty-two.

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# **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 going to share some of the responses that we received to our question “What do you wish you had known about research from the very beginning?”

We had several people respond to us on Twitter, and I’ve also been collecting some audio files from guests who’ve come on the show as well. We didn’t have anyone brave enough to call the voicemail line, so I’ve also done a little bit of blog reading to find some compilations from others about what they wish they had known and I’ll share some of those thoughts, as well as link to the blog posts in the show notes.

First, from Twitter:

@modernecologist shared that she wished she had known that research is never going to be perfect. I loved that comment and I also think it ties in with the idea that you can have lots of different kinds of research that might get you to an outcome that’s really effective and helpful, but the designs might look differently. So, it’s not even like there’s one way to do it. There could be lots of different ways to think about going about a research project as well.

We also heard from @TheTattooedProf (or as many of you may know him, Kevin Gannon from our episode nine). He offered us a couple of tweets and said he wished he had known that it’s ok if you don’t read every word of every source every time and he noted that grad school gives you guilt about that. And I completely agree. I feel like grad school was actually the period of time where I learned to skim information for my research and make sure that I wasn’t having to read every single word. So, thank you Kevin for that.

He also tweeted that he wished he had known the power and support that can come from a writing group. Scholarship doesn’t have to be a solitary endeavor. And that is absolutely true. And we’ve definitely discussed that this month. We talked a little bit about that with Tara Gray in our first episode of the month. And we will definitely link to that in the show notes in case you want to learn a little bit more about writing groups and support structures for your writing and research.

We also heard from one of our librarians at Oregon State University, Brooke Robertshaw, who tweeted that she wished she had known what makes for a quality research question. She says, ten years on and I’m still not secure in the quality of my research questions. And I love that Brooke’s comment points out that we’re still learning and growing as researchers, even after being in research positions and conducting research for several years. There still may be areas where we feel like we need to learn more or we’re not as secure as we’d like to be. So, I appreciate her sharing that.

I want to thank all of those folks that responded to our question on Twitter and who follow the show there. Remember that you can follow the podcast @RIA\_podcast. Twitter is probably the most active form of social media that the podcast uses and we’re really engaged there, so hopefully you’ll come and find us.

Now, on to our audio clips:

I’ll start with our most recent guest, Noah Shusterman.

**NS:** I’m Noah and I wish that I had known that choosing to research what you really love researching makes things a lot harder and sometimes you want to figure out what’s the easy way to get this thing done.

**KL:** Now you’ll get to hear from some of our upcoming guests. I’ll let the rest of the guests introduce themselves, but first here’s Michaela sharing what she wishes she had known about research from the very beginning.

**M:** Katie, one thing I have come to really love about my job is I get to explore the history of scholarship and the history of academia. And see that it’s really these communities of really caring, smart, bright people that have created these trends over time. So, peer review isn’t as old as I thought it was. I’ve come to see literature reviews really as just a conversation with some people who are no longer living and some people who are. So, that community aspect of research is something I’ve really grown to appreciate over the years.

**JH:** Hey, this is Jennifer Herman. One thing I wish I’d known about research from the very beginning is how important project management is. That getting yourself organized, whether you’re writing by yourself or working with other people, is such an important part of the research process. And keeping good records of where you are in the process, so you don’t have to repeat your work again. So very important.

**S:** So, I’m Sam and I wish I had known that research could include interventions. That it could be really something practical that could help people, if not immediately, then pretty close to immediately after the research is conducted.

**J:** Hi, my name is Jamison and what I wish I knew about research from the very beginning is that when you do community-based research with non-profits or service agencies or community safety nets, it’s very important to develop a relationship with them from the beginning that is a win-win. And, so, you’re not just coming in there to ask them for data, you’re developing a relationship where your work with them is going to benefit them in certain ways. And whether it’s helping them get their data organized so they can present to their funders and sponsors or to state legislatures or whatever it may be, but that it will be a, you know, a, like I said, a win-win relationship.

**M:** Hi, I’m Matt and what I wish I knew about research from the beginning is that normal people publish each and every day. I thought these were super star athletes, but they’re just normal people like you and me.

**A:** I’m Adriane and I wish that I had known just how time-consuming research is. It’s incredibly exciting and rewarding, but I had no idea how consuming it would be in terms of the planning and the execution and all of the different steps of research.

**S:** I’m Sarah, and I wish I had known that research is as much about communication and persistence as it is about numbers and learning new information. I’ve learned over time that networking and collaborating and making sure that you know the context in which your research is occurring is just as important as the data that you’re collecting or the methods and the analysis that you’re using.

**KL:** I love the range of responses that we got to our question. I’m going to take a brief break. When I come back I’ll share a little bit about what the blog posts had to say about what scholars wish they had known about research from the very beginning.

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# **Segment 2:**

**KL:** I came across some great blog posts from folks sharing what they wish they had known about research or just about grad school or being in academia from the very beginning. First, a post from Samantha Linder (no relation to me, at least not that I’m aware of) and what she wishes she had known about scientific research. Samantha shares seven things and I’m just going to talk about a few of them here, but make sure to read the full blog post that we’re going to link to in the show notes. So, one of the things that Samantha says is: “D**on’t be afraid to ask questions**.” As she explains, in her experience it is knowing the tiny details of the procedures that really makes a difference in how confident you feel. And I think that’s such an important point. I love that idea and I think about all the different people that I draw into the research projects that I do here at Oregon State Ecampus and how usually there’s a huge team of people involved because we need so many different skills and expertise areas. And I’m asking questions all the time to make sure that we can get the right research and the best outcomes possible. So, I love that.

Samantha also wishes she had known about how much the details matter. She continues, “I suppose this one is obvious but it is hard to grasp just how true it is until you mess something up. Be sure to not only always be extremely aware of what is happening but also know what could go wrong (and what you should be doing if something does go wrong).” And, again, I just love that. I’ve always had situations where something isn’t quite right and you need to fix it and it’s often very much rooted in the details of the research. But one of the key things, I think, about conducting research is having your eyes open to that and knowing that you might make a mistake or need to make a change or an adjustment to really ensure you have the outcomes you’re hoping for.

The other thing that Samantha talks about that I really liked is she wishes she had known that you can have fun with research. And this really reminded me of our recent episode with Jason Osborne where he talks about having fun with data and playing around with it and how, in some cases, we’ve kind of lost that. So, you can check that out in episode seventeen and we’ll make sure to link to that in the show notes as well.

Another blog post that I found was from George Byrne, this was from 2015. And he talked about what he wished he had known before starting a PhD. And I had a few favorite pieces from that post as well. He first talks about how you’ll be treated as an expert whether you like it or not. And I thought that was such an excellent point and something that not always, you know, people don’t always think about that. But I also really thought that when you’re treated like an expert it can make it really hard to ask questions or admit that you don’t know something or that you’re not an expert, you know, in everything about research. So, I think that that’s actually one of the harder things to come to terms with. Is this idea of, you know, you’re not going to know everything, but other people might think that you do. And they might be surprised if you admit that you don’t know something or that you feel a lack of confidence. And one of the things that I have just done for this myself is I frequently tell people, “I don’t know.” And I don’t pretend that I do know if someone asks me about a term and says, you know, “Do you know what this means?” I will say, “No, can you please explain it to me?” I don’t say, you know, I don’t pretend like I understand. And I think that this is a really kind of difficult trait to have, especially if people think you’re supposed to be an expert. But an important one because it means that you’re not kind of pretending your way through your research, and that you’re definitely getting the information you need along the way.

George also talks about how he wishes he had known that nobody will really understand what your research is about, and he says including you. And this reminded me about the importance of being able to talk about your research in a way that other people can understand. And this is something that I don’t think is always taught in graduate school, at least it wasn’t necessarily taught in my experience. Of how can you talk to, talk about your research in a way that laypeople will understand or just your colleagues maybe from other disciplines will understand. And we’ve had a couple people I think talk about this on the show, particularly in terms of science and how to communicate with other people or with the public. And maybe our episode with Geoff Pullum is a good example of that, of communicating his linguistics and theoretical research to the public. We’ll definitely link to that in the show notes. But definitely this idea that you need to have a really strong understanding of what your research is so that you can talk about it with other people and practicing that is an important thing to do. And I think especially when you think about things like grant funding where you’re turning in applications that are being read by people outside of your discipline, it’s pretty important that you can explain things in terms that a lot of people can understand. So, thank you George for those comments.

And then another recent blog post by Jeff Layton shares the responses of ten different people and what they wish they had known before going to grad school. I won’t share all of them, but just some of my favorites were: Getting a Ph.D. is a “create your own adventure” sort of situation. And I think that that is probably true for many of us. We may not know it going in, but once we’re there we realize we really have to shape and mold what it is we’re doing with our degrees.

He also notes that, or one of the people that he interviews, notes, “science is not linear, and because of this, your Ph.D. won’t be either. In the pursuit of the undergraduate degree, success was dictated by knowing facts and passing tests. Graduate school is an adventure in the unknown, taking existing knowledge and asking unknown questions.” Which to me, also really gets to the heart of the research endeavor that we are, for many of us, venturing into unknown territory where we’re really not sure what’s going to come out of the research and maybe it’s not something that we would expect. Or we hypothesize something and we find out the opposite. So, I love that idea. Both of those folks really shaping and framing research as a kind of adventure. And that ties back I think as well to the earlier comment about how it can be fun when we adventure and we go in with kind of a curious and adventurous spirit, it can add a lot of fun to our research as well.

And also I found a blog post, the last one I found, from an early researcher, Aly, who shared three of the following things, which I found really important. One is to write everything down, which I could not emphasize more. The idea of, you know, we think that we’ll be able to kind of keep everything in our brains and I just don’t think we can. And so, that’s why I use a lot of white boards. I talked about this in an earlier episode, which I can link to, about getting information out of our brains and onto the page or onto a white board. But also just so we don’t lose anything and having a digital document or some kind of other space to write down your ideas so they don’t get lost is huge. So, I love that advice.

Also, the idea that we need to back things up. And I heard this actually from a couple of people when I was asking them what they wish they had known. People would say things like, you know, “I wish I had known to start a citation database earlier” or “I wish I had had a better understanding of cloud backup systems.” And I think that all of that gets to this idea of how do we organize and maintain and keep our data safe, so that we know that it’s going to be where we need it to be. And we did have an early episode on data management with Steve van Tuyl, which I can link to in the show notes, that kind of talked about this as well. So, that was something that I loved from Aly.

And then the last thing that she said and I think it’s an excellent way just to kind of end on, end on this note, is to ask for help. And this is something I think that we don’t know from the very beginning. That we can reach out and ask people to help us. And even just recently I was working on a large research grant application, I’m actually still in the midst of it right now, and I needed some help with the budget. I needed someone to kind of walk through it with me and really think about, you know, how might the numbers change over four years and with all the different players who were involved, and just really making sure that everything in my overall narrative for the grant was really covered in the budget. And it was just something that I wanted a second pair of eyes and I wanted a second brain to kind of think through it with me. And I asked for help. I reached out to someone who is more familiar with budgets in our area and just said, “Can we have a quick meeting and maybe even a second meeting to talk through some of these things?” And it was really helpful and very affirming to know that I had that backup and that someone could come and help me with some of that information. I think sometimes we can get stuck and feel like we’re the only ones that can contribute to our research when in actuality if we ask for help, there are probably people who are both willing and able to help us in really important ways.

So, I love to engage with *Research in Action* listeners. Thanks so much for playing along with me on this episode. And hearing the range of responses of what people wish they had known was just incredibly full of insights for me and really got me thinking. Hopefully you found some of them, helpful as well.

I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

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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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