Episode 33: Inger Mewburn

**KL:** Katie Linder

**IM:** Inger Mewburn

**KL:** You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode thirty-three.

[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 this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Inger Mewburn, a researcher specializing in research education since 2006. She is currently the Director of Research Training at The Australian National University where she’s responsible for coordinating, communicating, and measuring all the centrally run research training activities and for conducting research on student experience to inform practice. Inger also runs a popular blog, *The Thesis Whisperer*, and writes scholarly papers, books, and book chapters about research student experiences with a special interest in the digital practices of academics. She’s a regular guest speaker at other universities on publishing, writing, social media, and presentation skills.

Thanks so much for joining me today, Inger.

**IM:** Thanks for having me.

**KL:** So, I have to say, I have followed your blog, *The Thesis Whisperer,* for quite some time. Since I was a graduate student for sure. And I wanted to start there because I think this is just such a great resource for researchers. I still read it, even though I’m not, you know, in graduate school anymore. I’d love to hear about how the blog got started, and what were some of your original goals when you first kicked it off?

**IM:** Well thanks. I always like to hear it that people are using it and enjoying it and getting good things out of it because it runs on love. It never fits into any job description or time. It’s sort of my hobby I suppose, but it’s something I feel so passionately about that it’s hard to imagine giving it up. I started the blog in, I think it was 2011, right after I finished being, 2010 actually, right after I finished being a grad student myself, we call it Ph.D. student here. I’d been working, actually teaching Ph.D. students writing skills and so on while I was doing my Ph.D., which is a very interesting meta-experience because I often felt like I was in a helicopter watching myself having all the troubles that I tried to help other people not have. So, I already had that experience. And in my teaching practice there, because I didn’t have a Ph.D., because I was doing one, and going through the same things, I think I took a very different approach to my teachers that I encountered during my grad years. Which was that I was working from a place of empathy, and I was also working from a place of research.

I didn’t have the authority. I didn’t have “doctor” in front of my name, so I didn’t have the authority to say “This is the way it’s done.” All I could do is go back to the research and there’s an extraordinary amount of research on research. On all aspects of things like supervision, like attrition, like retention. And so I’d go back to this research as my source of authority. I’d translate that research for the students because that research is often written by research educators for other research educators to use, not for the students themselves. And so, I was constantly doing this process of translation for the students, and getting really good feedback from it. And I was doing, of course, eating my own cooking and following the advice I was giving out to other people, which was based on the research. And I finished my Ph.D. in three years completely flat, which was the aim I’d set for myself. And I got the medal in my faculty for the best thesis. And at that point I felt really confident that the advice that I was giving out, which was, I want to emphasize, based on the work of many other people, was really worth giving out and worth following.

At the same time, smart phones had come out, and I’d started to read blogs during my commute, and I found so many great blogs you know, knitting, money, all these things. Just offering really practical tips on how to just get by in ordinary life. And I thought, “Wow, what Ph.D. students need is a blog like that.” So I looked for it, of course thinking someone would’ve done it before. And it didn’t seem like they did, so I thought, “Huh, that’s pretty interesting.” At the same time, I’d talked to my brother-in-law who works in Silicon Valley but lives in Melbourne, and has always had a really amazing career. People head hunt him all the time. And I’d sort of talked to him about my career and where it was going, and he said to me, “You’ll get your next job through the internet.” So, he said, “The way to do that is to start a blog because a blog enables people to see your expertise unfold over time. And if you do a useful blog that people will get something from, you’ll get an audience and a following, and you’ll get peer respect and recognition from that.”

So, these things were sort of swimming around in my mind, and then one day I had a ride to work and I got really wet in a rainstorm, and so I jumped in the shower – all good things happen in the shower, ideas-wise, I’m convinced – and then it just came to me. Students have been calling me that off and on as a joke because I seem to, they’d come to me with a problem and I’d sort of pull out some solution. They’d think it was magic, but it’s really just all from all my reading. I was obsessively reading because I was so worried about teaching them that I just wanted to be completely prepared and have all the facts at my fingertips. So, I’d sort of sound like an oracle to them, when really it was just the result of absorbing so much information and translating it. And so they’d started calling me that sort of as a joke, and then it sort of just in the shower occurred to me, “What a great name for a blog!” So, I wrote it on the shower screen, got dressed, ran back to my computer, no one had taken it, I just grabbed it, and then I thought, “Well what am I going to do with it?” And I wrote my about page, which has a set of editorial guidelines on it, things like, we want to write about writing, but that’s not the only thing that gets you through a Ph.D., there’s lots more to it. You know, we want to write about how you feel, we want this to be a space where you can express yourself. And I wrote this “we” language when there was no “we.” I was just imagining that eventually other people would join me. And that’s been the most amazing, unfolding thing. So, for a couple of years I had to write most of the content, but gradually people started to see other people post stories, and it became kind of like a local newspaper for Ph.D. students. That was, broadly speaking, the vision. I love the local newspapers, you know, the sort that’s just your community and your town. And, you know, you see pictures of your friends in it and you hear about the local scandals and the accident that was on the corner of the streets that you actually know the names of and where that accident happened and you think “Oh, what was that about?” And so, then I felt like there was such an opportunity for community-making through that.

Another thing, and this comes from my own reading on the topic, but one of the reasons that Ph.D. students pull out of their studies when they’re actually sort of doing okay. I mean they’re encountering some of the usual problems, but they don’t realize that they’re usual problems. They think that these problems are unique to them, and that it’s their fault that they’re suffering those problems. And Barbara Lovitts, who’s a US researcher, wrote an excellent book called *Leaving the Ivory Tower*. She calls this pluralistic ignorance. So, it’s a failure to recognize that your problems are actually not your problems, they’re the system problems. And the blog has always had that underlying it, which is to speak about these problems. Not to normalize them, but to question them, and to contest them, and to say “Do you always have to have trauma when you’re doing your Ph.D.? Is that normal? Can you speak back to that? At what point are you experiencing just the pain of learning and something else?” So, there’s a lot going on there conceptually behind the blog. And it’s been very clear in my mind, but I haven’t written very much about it. Whenever someone asks me, so it’s really great that you asked me, it comes out. I listen to myself and think, “Oh, yeah. Yeah, you actually do know what you’re doing!” But half the time it does feel like I’m just kicking the can down the road and kind of making it up. And that’s what I love about blogging, you know, it’s so responsive. You’ve just got people feeding back to you all the time, you get so many ideas. And I can put problems out there to the bigger audience, and it’s great you say that you keep reading it. And that’s been a revelation to me too because I’ve thought now, seven years I’ve gone through sort of two, one and a half, two cycles of potential Ph.D. students. So, a lot of original readers are now graduating and still reading it, and telling me they still read it as supervisors themselves. Or even if they’ve left academia, which is really flattering because it’s become this place where you can source that community knowledge, and that’s really important to me.

**KL:** Well, I love that story of how it got started. Thank you so much for sharing that. We’re going to take a brief break. When we come back we’ll hear a little bit more from Inger about her work as the Director of Research Training at the Australian National University. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** So Inger, in segment one you shared a little bit about *The* *Thesis Whisperer* blog and how it came to be. And I’m wondering if you can chat a little bit about how that blog connects to your work as Director of Research Training at the Australian National University.

**IM:** Ok, well I mean, the first thing to note about that is that the blog was the direct reason I have this role.

**KL:** Oh, interesting.

**IM:** Yeah, ANU had noticed the work that I was doing there and rang me up, and said “Hey, we enjoy that. Why don’t you come up for a chat? We’d like to learn from you.” And, “Hey, if you’re thinking about at all about leaving your current position, can we talk?”

**KL:** Interesting!

**IM:** And so I went up for the interview you have before you have the interview. Just a lunch, it ended up being a two hour lunch. I think they found me quite strange because I used to be an architect. I had a career as an architect for ten years before I left. And there’s not an easy narrative to tell between being an architect and being a research educator. And research education itself is a very strange niche little field, that I didn’t know existed before I did it. It’s one of those classic accidental careers.

There are currently on the main mailing list that we talk between ourselves, and that I do enlist, the National Doctoral Education Research Network. I believe there’s about 400 people on that list. When we last had a research meet-up, there were 50 of us very actively researching in the field from all around the world. One of the reasons this specialty exists where it didn’t exist really before the late 90s, and only really came into its own in the early 2000s, and I got into it in 2006, so I sort of was fairly early on in the process, and it’s become quite mature. So, the key conference in the field just did its 20th year, and that’s in Australia. And Australia seems to have been this incredible wealth spring of research education. So, I’ve been very fortunate to be sitting in a country where this is a very strong and well-known field, relatively speaking. And the reason for that is our government funds our Ph.D. students completely. It’s free to do a Ph.D., which must stun some American listeners.

**KL:** It blows my mind a bit, yes.

**IM:** And in fact, not only is it free for citizens, they’ll pay you to do it because they want to drive the knowledge economy along. But what goes with that is they do it very cleverly. We have a history of being quite clever and cunning in our government policy around education, I have to say. And so, one thing they do is they say, “Ok, well, it’s free to the student and we’ll pay the university, but we’ll only pay you if that student finishes. If that student doesn’t finish, you get nothing.” So, some of these students became a risk. We had to have them because we need to carry the research of the university forward, particularly in science really relies on having a ready supply of young people wanting to do Ph.D. And, of course, Ph.D. in other disciplines, like the humanities, tends to be a much older profile. But the government doesn’t discriminate, to their credit. They’ve let the universities decide where to enroll students and how much. And so, universities over-enroll knowing that some students will dropout. But the dropout rate across the world is huge. I mean, in the US in some places it’s 50%. We’re not that bad here, but nationally it’s at 25%.

So, universities have Ph.D. students as a loss leader, in retail terms. You know, they know they’re going to lose money on them. It’s just a question of how much money they lose. So, people like me are risk-management tools and a whole profession has grown up around working between the cracks of all the other services that are provided by the university. Trying to bring them together, make them legible to the student, guide them to it. Provide them with advice on things like examination, on supervision, on research integrity, which is obviously really important. And so, I, and also things like presentation skills. So, I do a range of things here.

So, the Ph.D. student in ANU will encounter me at very strategic points in their candidate jump. So, they’ll see me, first off, they’ll come to a welcome event and I’ll do work with them based on the MOOC that I did a couple, a year ago now, called “How to Survive your Ph.D.” So, I do a sort of an early workshop, which is about resilience, also how to recognize bad advice, and just try to prepare them, pre-game if you like, for what’s coming. So, then they go off and they do their thing, and we offer shut-up and writes in the cafes around campus. And we try to encourage community to form. We do some research integrity training. And then in second year they might encounter me to do the three minute thesis. I’m not sure how widely known this is in the US, but there are US universities doing it. So, basically the idea behind that is to say what, you know, what you’re doing for your thesis, how you’re doing it, and why it’s important in three minutes. So, I can be in the training, I run some of the training myself, and I also look at all the finals inside the university. And we run a three minute thesis ANU final, which is our key event for the year. About 900 people come to that.

**KL:** Wow.

**IM:** It’s kind of like Ph.D. sports. You know, because it’s exciting. You just, you don’t know if a person is going to bring it in under three minutes. Occasionally have to ding people out. So, that’s quite a lot of effort for our team to sort of engage students. And it’s important to do it, to train them. To give them body coaching, voice coaching, scripting. So, there’s a lot of effort that we put into that, and then they go onto the national finals and the international finals now at another university. So, we do that. So, they might encounter us there.

And then they might, if they’re unlucky enough to fall into some sort of hole, they might encounter me in a thesis boot camp program, which I adapted from the work of Peter Freestone and Liam Connell at Melbourne Uni. I saw they were doing amazing things there. We call three minute, we call, sorry, thesis boot camp the mother-in-law treatment. This is based on the fact that my dear mother-in-law when I was doing my Ph.D. and I had a young child, we used to just go down to her house in the country, hand over my child and my laundry, and lock myself in a room in her house and she’d sort of pass food under the door. And I would just get the work done while she made all the other decisions about how my kid was going to be cared for and what I was going to eat. And so, there’s something about having the decisions taken out of your hand that’s really powerful. There’s also something about being set a strict goal that’s really powerful.

So, the idea of three minute thesis, sorry, I get them mixed up, the idea of thesis boot camp is that we set campmates a strict task. We say, “We’re going to take you Friday afternoon from about 3:00 pm ‘til 8:00 pm on Sunday, and you’re going to write 20,000 words.” And they don’t believe us that they can do that. Always, three or four people do manage it. Everybody gets 5,000 words and some people write, lots of people write between 5,000 and 15,000 words, which they never thought they could do. And we do that with a series of writing techniques, structuring techniques. So, we take them through the whole process of writing differently, and we make them sit with that process and work with that process in a supportive group environment. We have a counselor, we have a writing tutor, we have a yoga instructor. It’s a holistic thing, and this has amazing effects on keeping people in their program, and helping them finish. Because in the end, all the university cares about at that point is is the money going to hit the bucket? Can we get these people we’ve invested so much time in over the line? So, that’s been really interesting work we’ve been doing a couple of years. And that’s shown real interesting results as well, which I can’t talk about quite yet, but I’ve been doing an analysis of that.

After that, you might encounter, or about that same time if you’re doing well perhaps, you might encounter my social media training, which we do over a six week period. And so, again, that’s sharpening people’s ability to talk about their research and present their research in public. And finally because my research is now about careers and employability, we’re developing a program for helping people either follow their dreams in an academic career or to move out. Because now 60% of our graduates in Australia work somewhere other than the education sector. And that’s seen as a good thing. We want to celebrate that. We think that’s good for the student. They get more money, and our economy and our prosperity in the country depends on having smart people working in all sorts of industry segments. So, that’s the idea behind that new program. So, if you could sum up my job is I try, they pay me to care about the whole picture and the whole student’s development, and for me and my team to strategically intervene and create opportunities, especially to connect them with each other in a sort of cross-disciplinary community.

**KL:** Well, I can promise you I’m not going to be the only researcher listening to some of these programs wishing I could sign up myself. They sound great, especially the idea of a boot camp where you just sit down and have things taken care of for you while you write and get your words on the page.

We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from Inger. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Inger, one of the things that I really admire about your work on the blog is, of course, you’re such a prolific writer there, but you’re also really pursuing your own pipelines of research, which I also find really fascinating. We talked a little bit about the research you’ve done on academic blogging. I know you’re doing some other work as well. You’re quite the prolific writer, so I would love to hear, and I’m sure our listeners would love to hear, what are some of the concrete strategies that you’re using to really keep up your own writing pipeline and to make sure that you’re moving pieces through and out the door and into publication.

**IM:** Yeah, well, I still feel like I’ve got a lot to learn in this respect. It’s nice to hear me described as prolific because I suppose I compare myself to other people like Pat Thomson, who is like genuinely, she’s a machine. So, I’ve got good people around me to help me develop my practice. One of the things that really helps me is my background as an architect. When you’re an architect, you have to deliver a building to a client at a particular time. And in order to that you have to become a friend of the Gantt Chart and you have to plan and you have to understand the notion of dependencies – that one thing depends on another thing being done before it can be complete. So, I have this mindset and this ability to think in this way that I developed over ten years while working in architecture at even quite a junior level.

And so, I have a number of projects on the go at the same time. I think it’s really important to be able to switch gears between things, and that’s a skill you have to learn to be able to do. But it means if you get bored with one or you get stuck with one you can jump to the other and you can keep a couple of dishes going on the stove at the same time. And a lot of people, it’s taken me until recently to realize that a lot of people don’t do that. They really concentrate on one thing at a time, and I respect that, but I think that you’re probably making life pretty hard for yourself because it’s kind of like putting your head in a bucket. And if it becomes very constraining, you don’t have any way to take your head out. You’ve got no other things to do. So, that’s one thing: work on multiple things at the same time.

Understand where you write and how you write well. So, I write well in cafes, I write very well in airport lounges. I read very well in airport lounges actually, and reading’s part of the process too. I tend to not write very well at my desk until I’m on deadline. I like to write on the couch on a Sunday afternoon until my shoulder gets to sore for that. So, I have a series of places where I know different sorts of writing gets done best in a different sort of setting. So, creative writing is best on a Sunday afternoon on the couch, and that’s where I blog because I feel happy. And I bring that mood into my writing. I feel light-hearted, I’m not at work, I’m not sort of thinking in those constrained ways. I’ll write all the, I mean there’s a whole writing practice there that isn’t what you see. There’s writing policy papers and writing persuasive memos, and I write heaps of that stuff, and I do that at my desk. Sometimes I’ll shrug off to the library on campus and I’ll do, you know, my own paper writing. But to be honest, when I run the boot camps, it’s a really good opportunity to boot camp myself. So, the last boot camp I ran, we were doing journal writing instead of thesis writing, and I sat down and I wrote a journal article from start to finish in front of and with the students. I find that community writing energy keeps me on-task.

We use a time boxing technique called the Pomodoro. And that’s tomato in Italian and it’s developed by an Italian student who used a tomato timer to keep himself focused for twenty-five minute writing stretches, and then you have a ten minute break, and then a twenty-five minute writing stretch. We took some students down to our beachside campus, which, just to make all your American students jealous, is so full of kangaroos that you trip over them. It’s the most beautiful setting. It’s called Kioloa and it was gifted to ANU. ANU is the National University, so we’re quite well-funded and well looked after by various people. So, we have a lot of resources that other universities don’t have, and one of which is this coastal campus. So, we sat in the room, we do four Pomodoros in a row with ten minute breaks in between. And I would take a walk between each Pomodoro. So, we would get up and we would walk laps because I want to count my steps. And so, it’s 2,000 steps, 10,000 words was the mantra. And so, we would get up and we would walk in between the Pomodoros. Those kind of community settings, a lot of people think, “I need to be locked away.” You know, “I need nobody to see me while I do my writing.” But, in fact, other people’s eyes on you is an incredible disciplining tool. It keeps you on task. And I got that journal done, so that’s going to be a strategy for me going forward. Is to just set a goal to write a paper at each of those boot camps. I do four a year, so that should sort me out in that sort of peer-reviewed writing space.

So, it’s a range of strategies, but it’s reflecting on what works for you. So, keeping actual spreadsheet counts of the number of words that you write each day and noting where you were, what you were doing, what you were thinking, what was your mood. These are all sort of critical tools for recreating the environment and the mood that works for you to be productive. And as a working academic, meetings are a constant distraction. You know, sort of time to wind up to a meeting, time to wind down. And so, I gang all my meetings. So, knowing that this podcast is on this morning, the rest of my day is back-to-back meetings. And I might as well just burn a day talking to people. I like talking to people, but I can’t switch very well from talking to people to doing my writing. So, I try to stay home on Fridays to do that and also try to carve out at least half-day stretches to do the rest of my writing. And it changes over time. You know, during my Ph.D. because my child was so much younger. He’s now a huge, lunking fourteen year old that’s 6’2”, but he was little and he used to wake up early and then have to be put back to sleep about 4:00 am, which is, you know, oh my god. And then I realized at some point that I’m actually quite awake at five o’clock. I’ll have a coffee and I’ll just get started. And I wrote pretty much my Master’s thesis and a lot of my Ph.D. between 4:00 am and 8:00 am in the morning. So, it really just depends on what time of life. But I think those dedicated stretches and carving those out.

And there’s a lot of advice that floats around there about being selfish. “Oh, you have to be selfish. You have to be selfish to get your writing done.” And you don’t have to be selfish. You can be really generous, but you need to put boundaries around when you’re going to be generous and when you’re going to just retreat and do your writing, and when you’ll be available again for people so that you don’t sort of disappear and never come back, or don’t say when you’re coming back. Just be very clear. Like, today, Tuesday, I’m just going to have meetings all day. Thursday, I don’t know. I have some friends in town, we’re going to sit down and shut up and write together all day. And I’m looking forward to do that. So, there’s never one way to do things, and I’m always wary of advice that says, “You should” or “You must” or “This is the only way.” Yeah, I think that’s all I have to say about that.

**KL:** There’s such great tips, and I think especially your emphasis on knowing yourself, and also that things change. And I also think there are certain times when you write better, you know, in terms of actually producing new material versus times when maybe you’re just in a revision space where you can revise and you’re not going to be creating as much original content. So, I think that’s excellent tips. Inger, I’m wondering if you can share with us a little bit more about what’s coming up next for you in terms of your own research and writing.

**IM:** Well, I’m doing a very exciting project with Data61 and my research partner Will Brandt from the Center of Public Awareness of Science. We’re doing a project in machine learning. Trying to teach a machine to read job advertisements. And the aim of this project is to determine the size and extent of the employment market for Ph.D. students outside of academia. So, what the idea is is we can take a database full of jobs from a job website and the machine can literally read it and tell the difference between a high knowledge-intensive job and low knowledge-intensive job. And we’re just in a very exciting stage of that project. Waiting to see the first cut of engineering next Thursday. You can just query the machine and ask it questions. I find that incredibly exciting, that kind of research. I’m nerdy, I love computers, I love pushing the boat out. So, I’m in an ideal place here at ANU to do that kind of work. And that’s been funded by the Australian government.

I’m also cooking, and it’s. I’m starting to articulate this publically, and if I articulate it publically, eventually it starts happening. I’d really like to do a very longitudinal research project on research students. I’m just thinking about how that project will work, and I’m talking to a colleague in Canada who’s very experienced at doing longitudinal research. I’d like to track a cohort of research students over a ten year period. I’m committed to being in this area of academia, at least I can’t see myself leaving. And it’s very rare that you get to do very long-term research, especially in the funding cycles that we have. Particularly here in Australia, it tends to be three year brackets. I’m interested in scoping out a project that’s systematic, but carries on over such long time period. I think we’d learn some really interesting things. One of the things that interests me particularly is the journey that older Ph.D. students take. So, we have a lot of students in their 40s and 50s who are coming to do a Ph.D. as a career transition. I’d like to see what happens to them, you know. Do they go on and make their career goals? Do they face ageism? So, those are the two areas that I’d like to look at. Both of them are kind of about the post-Ph.D. world because I think that really can help us help current students, but also give better advice because it is an area of large amount of anxiety.

**KL:** Well, I cannot wait to see where that work goes. I always enjoy seeing, you know, what’s on the blog, where your work is headed. And, Inger, I just want to thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing a little more about *The Thesis Whisperer* blog and some of your work in research training.

**IM:** Thanks so much Katie. I really enjoyed it.

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for 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.

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# Bonus Clip #1:

[music]

**KL:** In this first bonus clip for episode thirty-three of the *Research in Action* podcast, Dr. Inger Mewburn shares about her research on academic blogging. Take a listen.

I know you also have conducted some research on academic blogging, and I wonder if you can share a little bit about that. What have been some of your findings?

**IM:** So, I’m doing this research with Pat Thomson who runs the *Patter* blog. She currently works at the University of Nottingham, but she’s also an Australian. So, we, I don’t know, we have a connection. I’m a fangirl of Pat’s. Pat’s book *Helping Doctoral Students Write* that she wrote with Barbara Kamler is by far one of the best books ever written for Ph.D. students. Although, it’s actually written for their supervisors. And I really credit that book with getting me through my Ph.D.

**KL:** Oh, we’ll definitely link to that in the show notes so readers can take a look at it.

**IM:** Yeah. It’s a great book. Not for the first year student usually. It kind of upsets them since it’s so technical. But it’s for any Ph.D. student who’s writing a thesis and their supervisor says, “There’s something wrong with your writing, but I can’t express it to you. It’s just not flowing. It’s not right.” That’s the book to read.

And so I’ve read this book and I do credit it with getting the medal in my faculty. And so when Pat turned up on Twitter I was like, “Fantastic.” Just fangirled at her and she was like, “Well, I like your work.” And I felt very flattered. And then when she came to Australia we met up, and we’ve developed this sort of ad hoc research partnership. Both of us are really busy. So, this is the second mode of research that we’ve done together. The first set of research was on why do academics blog, and during that research we encountered a lot of Ph.D. blogs. Many more than we encountered as actual working academics. And in the end we excluded them from our dataset because there seemed to be something so interesting going on there. And we didn’t feel like we could really capture it with the method that we were using, which is basically content analysis.

So, we went back and we launched a survey late last year, or mid last year perhaps. 280 Ph.D. student bloggers responded to that and it’s an incredibly rich dataset. So, we’ve only done one cut through that. We’re putting it in a book chapter of a book we’re doing with Deb Lupton for Routledge called *Digital Academic Critical Practices*, which will have a whole lot of sort of sociological reflections on blogging. And that paper sort of talks about some of the practices. You know, why, what do Ph.D. students blog and why do they blog? So, we touch on things like some seem to blog very consciously, thinking about a professional practice and wanting to create their persona online, which was more or less why I was doing a blog in the first place. But there are other people that see it as a space of freedom. An escape from academia. And there’s also a lot of fear and uncertainty and doubt around blogging in the Ph.D. community. And I find that particularly interesting. I’m also drawn to the dark side of things. And why people stop blogging as well, which is one thing we asked them. There seems to be fear about having a misshapen academic text floating out there in the world. And blogging’s seen, well, at least the discourse around blogging is somehow it’s not real academic writing. It’s not peer-reviewed, and therefore it’s not proper. And so, people worry about having those texts circulating in the world. And yet they’re still using it for that purpose. To kind of shape an identity through their text. So, we’re finding this dissertation interesting. We’ve got a big set there, so this chapter’s really just setting out in broad brushstrokes what we see in that. And we’re going to drill down, so the next one I’d like to write from it would be about the kind of reactions that Ph.D. students get from senior faculty about their blogging practice. There’s a lot of disciplining of the young going on about blogging.

**KL:** That’s fascinating.

[music]

You just heard a bonus clip from episode thirty-three of the *Research in Action* podcast with Dr. Inger Mewburn sharing about her research on academic blogging. Thanks for listening.

# Bonus Clip #2:

**KL:** In this second bonus clip for episode thirty-three of the *Research in Action* podcast Dr. Inger Mewburn shares about her book *How to Tame Your Ph.D.* Take a listen.

I know, Inger, you’ve also written a book *How to Tame Your Ph.D.* Can you share a little bit about that? How did that come to be?

**IM:** Well, that was sort of a result of, having a blog is kind of like having an untidy attic, right? Like you publish in chronological order whatever happens to come up at the time, and then after a couple of years there’s a lot of posts on there and people come to the blog and they just don’t know where to find stuff. And so, they’ll often write to me and say, “Well have you written about this?” And I’ll have to search in my own blog to find where someone wrote about it. And I realized that there was a need to string some of the blog posts together in a narrative of the actual Ph.D. journey. And I hate that term actually. I don’t like calling it the Ph.D. journey because you’re not really going anywhere. You’re usually staying in the same place. But anyway, it was important to put together the posts that spoke to the different chronological times of the candidature. Much like we treat the curriculum here, the co-curricular activities that we offer here in a timeline approach, the book approaches the Ph.D. from that.

So, there’s some about scoping your project, about doing a literature review, about doing discussion chapters, about doing conclusions, and then about, you know, fighting off the procrastination theory, and writing techniques that help you be productive. So, I strung together in an e-book over a week. And I thought, well I’ll put it up for cheap on Amazon because I wanted to start paying my hosting. I wanted *Thesis Whisperer* to start supporting itself, so rather than have to take money out of the family income because it wasn’t funded by work. And so I stitched them together in a very short e-book and I put it on for the price of a cup of coffee in my hometown. I’ve since had to put it up because coffee’s gone up too. And so, and I know myself when I buy a book on Amazon. If it’s about the price of two coffees I think, “Well, I might as well buy it. Take a chance on it.” So that was a deliberate strategy to make it accessible. Because you know Ph.D. students have very constrained budgets. After a while that book had been, it got really positive responses. I think it’s got pretty good ratings on Amazon. People started writing to me and saying, “Can you do a print version because I want to lend it to people?” or “I want to write on it.” So, I put it on as print on-demand on Lulu, and actually it’s a tidy little money spinner that one. Certainly supports the work of the blog quite well. It pays for hosting and everything, so it’s done exactly what it’s intended.

I have two more books, e-books, waiting for me to find a week to be able to sit down and do them. But then, of course, publishers have approached me, so I have a book coming out through NewSouth Press next year called *How to Be an Academic*. Which is more, and I’m going to say it basically is a rant about being an academic in contemporary academy. And I think a lot of the advice that’s given out to Ph.D. students particularly, probably worked in the 80s and 90s, but doesn’t work now. So, that’s what that book will be about. So, I have quite a few fingers in quite a few pies. But the e-books are just a great way for people to discover the blog as well and to grow that community. Not that I’m obsessed with analytics because actually in the end you’ve just got to do quality work, and that speaks for itself.

**KL:** Absolutely. Well, we will definitely link to those in the show notes in case listeners want to take a look to those.

[music]

You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode thirty-three of the *Research in Action* podcast with Dr. Inger Mewburn sharing about her book *How to Tame Your Ph.D.* Thanks for listening.

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