Episode 45: Monika, Frank & Pat (Part 2)

**KL:** Katie Linder

**MR:** Monika Raesch

**PR:** Pat Reeve

**FC:** Frank Rudy Cooper

**KL:** You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode forty-five.

[*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.

This episode is part two of a two-part episode about researching and writing as administrators. I’m joined by three faculty members from Suffolk University in Boston, MA: Dr. Monika Raesch, associate professor and chair of the Communication and Journalism Department; Dr. Pat Reeve, associate professor and chair of the History Department; and Dr. Frank Rudy Cooper, professor of Law, who until recently was the president’s senior advisor for diversity.

Each of my guests today have recently experienced taking on administrative roles while also trying to maintain their scholarship and research productivity. I would recommend going back and listening to part one of this episode if you haven’t already, as we do make reference to some of the pieces that we talk about in part one.

Now, on to the episode.

Monika, Pat, and Frank, welcome back to part two of talking about some of your experiences as administrator-teacher-scholars. I thought in this part two we would focus on some of the support structures for writing that you’ve put together, and particularly for writing as administrators, and I know that one of these areas for you that’s been very effective is a writing group, and we talked a little bit in part one. But I want to delve a little bit deeper in this part two, and it’s important to note that there is actually a fourth member of your writing group, Micky, that got mentioned in part one who couldn’t be with us today. I’m actually going to try to record a separate episode with her, because she has some phenomenal things to say, also, as an administrator-teacher-scholar, so Micky, you are missed as we record this episode. But let’s talk a little bit about this writing group, a little bit about just how it began and how has it shifted as you’ve come into these administrator roles?

**PR:** Well, I can jump in here. Frank and I probably were present for the early formation of our subgroup. We were originally part of a writing group that you convened, Katie, when you were director of the Center for Teaching and Scholarly Excellence, and as you know but your listeners might not know, we used to meet—I think it was weekly, set goals, report in, and I think it was within a few years of you doing that that you had the brainstorm of creating subgroups that would establish their own meeting frequency and objectives, and initially—I’m trying to remember, Frank. Was it just you, me, and—who else?

**FC:** Well, it would have been—oh, and the—that’s right, so there was, like, 12 people and then subgroups—

**PR:** Yes, and you and I found our way to a subgroup.

**FC:** Yeah, because of the sort of gender angle.

**PR:** That’s correct, yeah. And then at that point, Micky joined us, and Frank and I were sort of, I would say, muddling along pretty effectively, but Micky had attended a Tara Gray training, a workshop, perhaps even while you were there, Katie, and Tara Gray lays out a writing group process that Micky had been very persuaded was effective, and we began adopting it for our own use, and in fact, it was very effective. And that process is simply reading one another’s work, not necessarily for argument but just trying to get the sense of it and giving feedback on where we lost focus in the writing, where in fact within the argument the key ideas are stated. That’s followed by praise of the piece itself, and the writer stays silent. And then I think at that point Monika expressed interest in joining us, we became a foursome at that point.

**FC:** And I would just sort of recall that we had a fourth member, Sue, who was a visiting scholar from China, and I found it particularly interesting to hear her perspective as a non-native speaker but who was writing on English and literature. One thing that I remember learning from her was about this sort of “reverse paragraph” in the first paragraph. I mean, maybe everybody else already knew this, but I usually just go from top down, and so there were certain techniques that I learned. But about the formation of the group itself, what I would say is the key sentences are key, and they’ve been interpreted in different ways at different points in our group. We really did start off with “Tell me the topic sentence” as the key sentence, and then we moved towards “Well, what do you want us to find as the key sentence?” So, sometimes, often for me, it was “Tell me what you think is the best or most interesting sentence in this paragraph; maybe that’s what the paragraph should really be about, instead of what I say the paragraph is going to be about in my topic sentence.”

**MR:** Yeah, I joined the group last, and when the visiting scholar left, that’s when the three of them invited me, and yes, I had expressed interest, and I was so delighted to join.

**KL:** I should also pop in and just mention for regular Research in Action listeners, Tara Gray did come on the show and talk about this method of finding topic sentences and also about her book Publish and Flourish, which also describes in detail this method. So please feel free to take a look at that episode. So, tell me a little bit about how the group shifted, if it did at all, when you became administrators. Did you start to have kind of a different focus to your conversations? And I also find it interesting that you all came into these administrator roles around the same time, which just seems really a nice coincidence for you to have together. So tell me a little bit about how the group shifted.

**FC:** So, certainly from my point of view, one of the ways it shifted was—I was having some difficulty with meeting our deadlines, and I think I bought the group one time yoghurt and cookies and so forth, and then we had a discussion about “Well, Frank, why are you buying us lunch today? What’s going on with your writing that you’re incurring all these penalties?”

**MR:** What we need to explain is that if you don’t meet your agreed-upon writing time, which might be like five days a week, 15 minutes, you have to put a dollar into our coffee jar. And so Frank would suddenly have racked up $25, and so we just said to him, “Just bring us lunch.” And that’s when he would come up with these wonderful surprise lunches.

**FC:** Yes, and the thing that I think was a shift in that was it certainly made me think about (and other members of the group had been thinking about) how can we use the group a little bit differently. So, when I felt like it wasn’t as helpful every day to report I did or didn’t do my 15 minutes when I was sort of like day 3 of several hours on administration, no time on my own work, then I started thinking about, alright, should I have a different reporting structure? Should I include work that is sort of on administration if it also includes the kinds of thinking that go into scholarship? So, we did talk a lot about this, and one of the shifts that I saw was I certainly started counting administrative work if it was work that required me to really kind of think deeply about a problem, synthesize things, and express myself in a clear way. And in this sense, I think that there’s a correspondence with the administrator, teacher, scholar all working together, because as an administrator, in some ways, you have to be able to teach in your memos to people saying, like, “This is why we’re going to do this practice.” But you have to sort of teach them a little bit of the background about why this is important and a little bit of “This is how we’re going to do this” in some of the administrative writing, so I feel like that’s a little bit of administration, a little bit of teaching, and a little bit of scholarship that goes into those skills. So, that was one shift, certainly, that there was some thinking about what counts.

**MR:** Yeah, I think we really expanded what we accepted as being scholarly writing, and also even before that, I know it shifted for me, it changed for me, was before that it was really timed writing time only. If you were reading an article or annotating it, that didn’t count at all, it was purely pure writing time, and I would find myself with a stopwatch and always hit “pause” when I needed to look up something, because it shouldn’t count towards the 15 minutes, because 15 minutes doesn’t sound like a lot, but if it is pure writing time, it can take you two hours or more to get to actually pure 15 minutes of writing time, and I know we adjusted that so that other things, like this pondering of an issue, like Frank said, synthesizing it, drawing up notes before you’re even able to put it into a coherent paragraph, that now also needed to be counted, because I was very concerned that the group would lose a supportive structure. I didn’t want it to be a source of stress, but a source of comfort, and I felt very—but that’s my personal issue—when I commit to something, I want to meet that commitment, and I started to feel pressured about how am I going to meet my allocated times, and no, I don’t want to lose a dollar into the coffee jar either. But so, for me, that change in—we are no longer counting our time now. We are still reporting to each other, but there is no penalty anymore, because we all know we’re doing the best that we can, and for me, that means the group is such a wonderful support system.

**FC:** Yeah, absolutely, and I think about that shift to counting different things as being important because if the 15 minutes or the hour or whatever the minimum requirement is becomes onerous, like in all things in life, the instinct is to shut down, so in some ways it had to adapt, but that little adaptation, I think, when we look long-term is part of a long and very complicated adaptation we’ve made of Tara Gray’s system. I’m not sure if Tara Gray would recognize what we do, but it definitely generated from what she recommends, and then because of all of own individual needs around this, it has shifted to thinking about topic sentences in different ways. Monika mentioned the book that she’s editing, and when we read her work, we’re doing something different, like, we were reading her translations, and reading her translations has been a different way of thinking, but I don’t know that that would always be what we would have thought about as your individual work before, but is so important to what you’re doing, so I think that’s important, to adapt it beyond the “Is it your original work that you spent 15 minutes and 00 seconds on?”, etc.

**MR:** Yes, I’m editing a book on a German filmmaker, and so 80% of the interviews that are in the book I have to translate into English, and since German is my mother tongue and English is my second language, I’m using the writing group to my own benefit here—

**FC:** Which is how it should be!

**MR:** [*laughs*] And every month they’re reading over my translations and telling me where I got it wrong.

**PR:** The only other thing I would add is that I think the reason that our method evolved successfully was that over the last two years, we’ve built up considerable mutual understanding and trust, and my advice to administrator scholar-teachers who might want to form such a group, say, one like ours, would be to cleave pretty closely initially to Gray’s prescription until you get to a point where you have a better understanding of one another, both because I think it creates accountability, but it also establishes some habits for the participating members in the group that they’re going to need over the long term. I think, had I had the flexibility that we now have, had I started with that flexibility, I’m not sure I’d still be in the group. I think I might have drifted off. But now it makes all the sense in the world for me to have this kind of flexibility. I still feel accountable to the group, who has been very patient with me periodically bouncing off of walls as I try to hit my stride as someone who aspires to continue being a scholar while serving as administrator.

**MR:** I want to add to Pat’s point. I think, for me, the reason it is so successful is we meet once a month, and while we have given each other flexibility, we still have that once-a-month deadline where we each have to bring two pages to the table. And one month for two pages, if that’s all you could do in that one month, but that’s still realistic, and you can succeed in that, and then you have Micky Lee come in and she wrote like 20 (but that’s Micky, she’s a superwoman). But I think that’s why it’s still so successful, and I love it.

**FC:** And I think the monthly check-in has been really important for the adaptation of the group. If we were just writing each other via email, it would be harder to get a real sense of what are the issues as an administrator-teacher-scholar that are slightly different that being a teacher-scholar, and how do they play out for each individual, and I don’t think there’s any way we could have had the conversation that ended up in writing this article together [***PR:*** “Yes.”] via email [***MR:*** “Yes.”]. We had to sort of look at each other and start saying, “Oh, yeah, this is a natural outgrowth of our group” and just feel it.

**PR:** There’s something about our history that makes our joint thinking very *simpático* [*Spanish or Italian*], for lack of a better word. I’m always struck at the end of a meeting by how well we—we may talk over each other at times, but we build on each other. You know, you see something bigger than the thing we came in with as our topic, and I wish there was some way to bottle what it is we’re able to do together and bring it to other settings.

**FC:** I’ll make another point about that—I’m sorry, Monika. Bottling it and bringing it to other people has actually proven to be somewhat difficult. I know that there was somebody, I think there have been two people that I’ve brought to the group to sort of observe our group, and I guess what’s hard to convey is if you start with a system that you can end up at this place of friendship and mutual support that goes beyond just support of writing, that’s hard to implant without starting, as Pat says, with it being really useful to you. And I would like to explore further what might be necessary at the start of a new group to make that work.

**MR:** And I think there’s the irony in this conversation that we are having right now. So, we all within a year became administrative teacher-scholars, and as Pat put it earlier, we found ourselves in this writing dilemma, but once we had decided to write this article together, I think we wrote 15 pages within a matter of one to two weeks, so suddenly it was like the dam had been opened and we could freely write, and this dedicated two hours of writing time in-person meeting was so productive in that you couldn’t have had that reaction afterwards or the result, [*inaudible*] result, as opposed to a reaction, if we wouldn’t have met in person. That really reenergized.

**FC:** Yeah, and for me recently, again, the dam has broken and I have felt like I’ve done a lot of writing for my own work, and I’ll write the group and sort of say, like, “210 minutes! My own work!” [*all laugh*]

**MR:** And he gets smiley faces in return. [*laughter*]

**KL:** I think this segment has been the best commercial for a writing group I’ve ever heard, ever. And also you guys are really pointing out the importance of long-term relationship-building with colleagues, and also I think what’s really fascinating (and it’s come out a little bit in your conversation) is that you’re all coming from different disciplines. And I think that’s something I’ve heard from a lot of faculty, saying, “I’m not sure I would mesh well with faculty who aren’t in my own discipline, or they may not be able to offer me feedback,” and clearly that has not been the case in this situation—

**PR:** Absolutely not.

**KL:** Yeah, and you’ve been able to have some really fruitful discussions.

We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back we’re going to hear a little bit more from Monika, Pat, and Frank about their self-reflective practices. Back in a moment.

[*music*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** One of the things that I’ve loved about this conversation so far is it’s very clear that each of you is really actively engaging in self-reflection about your writing life, but also your administrative roles, and I’m wondering if you can talk about some practices that have been especially helpful to you as you’re self-reflecting as administrative teacher-scholars.

**PR:** I actually wrote a fair amount about that in the article that we’re doing together from a more personal perspective, and I know Monika wrote about it from perhaps a more intellectual perspective. So, let me just say that if I had to distill what I’ve learned, I’ve learned that when I allow my sense of dutifulness or overzealousness as chair to prevail, I become emotionally and physically tired, I feel burdened by the work, and I lose perspective, and that only promotes self-doubt. So the challenge, then, is to figure out how to slow myself down so that I reflect in a more dispassionate way about my successes and failures, if you will, or my strengths and weaknesses as an administrator. So I‘ve become much more aware of the ways in which my self-assessments can affect my sense of confidence and in turn can either promote or hinder my ability to frame problems and solve them judiciously. And that of course includes problem framing and problem solving around maintaining a writing discipline.

**MR:** When Pat had suggested that we are doing this group article, I then kind of became the leader on this article, and what I didn’t tell my cowriters at the time, my coauthors, was that I was going to structure this piece and also the approach which we were taking to write this article modeling the good practice audit, and that’s something that Brookfield discusses in his book, and I amended it, basically, for our reflection and so that we could write a more layered article. And the good practice audit is split up into three phases. Phase one, the problem formulation: So what we did is we discussed the general introduction, but then every single one of us wrote an individual piece, and then we just brought that literally to the table at our writing group, and we saw where everybody had taken it, and that was ultimately the first draft of individual reflection, and there we discussed it, and we pulled out commonalities and differences that we had in our writing, which then also naturally transitioned us into phase two, which is the individual and collective analysis of the experience, and so we each went back to our tables and had revisions of our individual reflections and to focus further on specific subtopics we had decided and add depth to them, and then we brought them again back for further discussion into the writing group, and what I loved right now as I was listening to Pat is her individual piece has evolved so much from the very first draft to where she is right now, and what she has discovered along the process, that for me it just points out, again, the importance of reflection and how such a good proactive audit can be successful, it’s working. And then phase three, compilations of suggestions of practice, and we’re in the middle of this. We are in this—so in terms of the structure of the article, there is an introduction to us, and then individual reflection pieces, and now we’re in that final discussion piece that’s, again, a compilation of ours where we’re saying, you know, we have learned this and now here are really very specific suggestions of practice that now we’ve come across and that work for one of us, several of us, but ultimately what we have done over the past few months is a good practice audit, and I really see the benefit of it.

**KL:** Hmm.

**FC:** I can say I would just add that, for me, the self-reflection in many ways was around whether to continue in the position once the president who had asked me to take this role suddenly ceased to be the president. [*laughs*] And so, the reflection was more along the lines of how connected is this to my roles as teacher and scholar. I think it took me a while to realize how I could make it all fit together, and so initially my reflection was more along the lines of “Here are the problems with this,” especially as we worked on this article, and we’ve talked about the different reflections. I found that there’s probably a lot more possibility for it all to work together than I would have thought, and that wasn’t an immediate self-reflection, it’s been sort of a slow development as I’m thinking about how this all fits together.

**KL:** So I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about—you know, we’re talking about self-reflection, but clearly you’re doing some of these reflective practices as a group, and Monika, you gave a nice outline of how you kind of structured that within the article. I’m wondering if you can just talk about benefits that you’ve seen of doing some of this self-reflection in a more communal fashion, because clearly you’re sharing your experiences with each other and coming to, perhaps, even some “aha” moments about your work, your identities as administrator-teacher-scholars, that really goes beyond—I think when people think about self-reflection, they think about it as being more isolated. So can you talk a little bit about that and what it’s been like to engage in that self-reflection as a group?

**PR:** Can I jump in here, folks? Is that okay?

**FC:** Yes, please.

**PR:** I’ll speak here momentarily about one of Micky’s contributions to our thinking about our project, because it’s an idea that I took to heart and really began to examine in terms of my own experiences. She asserts, it’s a hypothesis, that administrators tend to separate out into two groups: those who see their work as a duty to be fulfilled—and she hypothesizes that people who are inclined to be dutiful are more likely to be susceptible to self-doubt—and then there are administrators, she contends, who see it as a right, almost as a perogative. And she has a gendered reading of, if we were to break out groups, what that might look like. And I would need to hear more from Micky, and I look forward to hearing more, but the piece that’s compelling to me, that intuitively I understand, is that if you have the perspective that administrative work is a duty, it really does feed a tendency toward overwork and an inability to really think judiciously about the obstacles you confront and how they must be overcome, because there’s a tendency if you’re dutiful to assume that you absolutely must bash on, beyond reason, sometimes, in the face of challenges.

**MR:** I think for me it has been all this group reflection, by hearing Pat, Frank, and Micky’s perspectives on what an administrative teacher-scholar is, and it has really helped me define the roles and own the terms for myself so that I was able to actually create a personal definition at this point, which for me it means being an administrative teacher-scholar still means being primarily a teacher-scholar who uses administration duties to complement her role as a teacher-scholar, but also vice versa. So I really want to ensure that, up to a certain extent, it is a two-way flow and consideration of information, but also being okay with the requirements of the roles that are actually different and do not lend themselves to be overlapping, and that there are limitations where they have to be some things that remain separate and be fine with that and be aware of it.

**FC:** Yeah, and for me, the reflection has been about what am I going to take back into the role solely (or mostly-solely) as teacher-scholar, because as Pat points out, service within the school is part of our duties. But reflection recently, even as early as earlier today, has allowed me to see, okay, now that I know kind of how different people act in different parts of the university, maybe I can apply that to my own colleagues on the law faculty and try and take a mature path away from potential conflict. And I wouldn’t have reflected in that way, I don’t think, without some broader perspective. Some of that has come from the writing group, just talking to other people at other parts of the university, but some of it’s come specifically from the role of administrator and from talking to deans of students, who I usually would not have much interaction with except to get an email saying, “So-and-so will not be in your class today.”

**KL:** Wonderful. I wonder if you can tell me a little bit more about—I think sometimes we hear *self-reflection*, it sounds a little abstract—what has this meant to you, to engage in self-reflection? Can you give maybe some concrete examples of how you do it, for people who might want to—you know, they’re hearing this, they’re going, “Wow, there are some really great benefits that are coming out of this self-reflective practice.” What does it look like in your professional lives to engage in this self-reflection?

**MR:** I am somebody who has to do it visually, and I am not a person who does any of this on the computer. I am usually having a pen and paper in my hand. And when I have to do some serious reflection, it might be really hard. It might be in the form of a SWOT analysis to begin with. “Let’s evaluate where I am at this point and what are my strengths, but what are my weaknesses, where are my challenges along the way?” And then I have to again be visual. As I mentioned previously, I am very schedule-oriented in that way, so that after reflection, now I have to put something into action. And whatever that is, and if that pertains to a schedule or it is an action item in a different way, such as now you need to read three more books on this topic, you don’t know yet enough, because one of the things I have found out, that administration has opened all these new possible readings and publication outlets, but that also means you are spreading yourself thinner, because your reading time has not exponentially expanded with it. But no, it’s still the same amount of reading time that I get each week, but now I have to spread it thinner between my discipline in film studies and video production, my teaching pedagogy, and now administration, so how am I going to do that and be okay, and will it not hinder me negatively in my scholarship and my teaching, and my administrative role. So I think there that sort of SWOT analysis brings you in to become aware again of commonalities and differences so that you don’t miss an iceberg, basically, that will sink you in the end.

**FC:** So I guess I would just say, for me, I’m realizing that it’s reflection through expression that’s important, so, having to explain to the group what is a problem I’m facing administratively, and sometimes this has been to the whole group during one of our monthly meetings, and sometimes it’s been to individuals. The way that I’ve reflected most successfully on this role, I think, is by saying, “This is the problem I’m facing,” and then hearing that sort of what might be a solution, and then thinking to myself, “Alright, is that the solution? Maybe I didn’t phrase the problem properly, or maybe now that I’ve heard the solution I can think about other things differently.” So, reflection through expression, I think, has been important for me.

**PR:** I think self-reflection aimed at anticipating challenges that will require a productive response has been helpful. For example, planning for a departmental meeting: not just simply identifying the topics, but actually thinking about how people are likely to respond to those topics. You know, I hate to make it sound like a chess game, but being mindful about unintended consequences would be one way I would think about it. But in terms of my writing life, I was struck recently at a meeting convened by our dean of the chairs when she was encouraging us to mentor faculty who might, in fact, be rather scattered in their writing objectives, and she described such a person, and I realized that was me, [*laughs*] and that I actually had to do for myself what she was suggesting I do with faculty. [***KL:*** “Hmm.”] And I realized that somewhere along the line this fall I had lost track of what my objectives really were, and like Monika I’m conscious of being pulled in two directions that aren’t always complementary—the scholarship of teaching and learning and traditional historical scholarship, but I’m doing less of the latter than I would like. So, in any case, I felt like I really heard her with different ears than I might have before this writing group, so clearly, I’ve been tuned in, in a way, from the writing group to consider things that I hadn’t previously. But I think if I had to sort of sum up, self-reflection for me is—I do take a SWOT analysis approach, although I don’t do it in quite as structured a way. But I try to identify what happened without editorializing about what happened. I then step back and try to figure out what would I like to happen. What are the opportunities or the—how can I facilitate achieving those goals, what are the obstacles to achieving those goals, and thinking through the limits of what I can do and how I might capitalize on an opportunity that I had overlooked previously. So, thinking judiciously about my objectives in relationship to the larger environment and also my best and worst [*laughs*] personality characteristics, you know, I want [*inaudible*] out of my own way.

**MR:** I actually want to add onto something that Pat and Frank said, and they again put it straight in front of my eyes here, that even though it’s called self-reflection, it cannot happen in isolation. And I have a wonderful colleague in my department who has taken it upon themself ever since I was, I think, first hired. He will come into my office and point out my strengths and weaknesses whenever he sees something. So, it might be Tuesday, 2 PM, the door opens, and he walks in, and he says, “Monika, this is a weakness of yours and you’ve got to tackle it.” But he always brings it from a very specific example. “I observed you doing this or that.” And then he comes back a month later and he’s like, “Monika, I’ve seen progress there.” And so that’s really helpful, and I told him I appreciate it and he should consider doing this, so this is now eight years down the line, we’re still going this. But becoming a department chair, his feedback now is really helpful because now it’s really important, what Pat says, how my faculty respond to this now that you are no longer just one of them but now you’re chairing, and the roles have shifted, and so it is much more important for me to be aware of my strengths and weaknesses, but how they might be perceived by others, and just accordingly. And so I think self-reflection never happens in isolation, always with others.

**PR:** I agree.

**FC:** Me too!

**KL:** Well, there has been so much wisdom shared in each of these episodes. I want to thank you all so much for taking the time to come and share with me some of your experiences as administrative teacher-scholars. It’s been a true pleasure, so thank you very much for your time.

**FC:** It’s always a pleasure to work with you Katie.

**PR:** Thank you very much.

**MR:** Thank you so much, Katie.

**PR:** Absolutely it is. Thank you.

**KL:** And thank you 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.

[*music*]

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