Episode 18: Dr. Tara Gray

# KL: Katie Linder TG: Tara Gray KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode eighteen.

# [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 am joined by Dr. Tara Gray, who serves as associate professor of criminal justice and as the first director of the Teaching Academy at New Mexico State University. The Teaching Academy seeks to improve student learning by providing NMSU educators with professional development in teaching, scholarship, leadership and mentoring. The Academy helps them develop extraordinary teaching lives embedded in exceptional careers. Tara was educated at the United States Naval Academy, Southwestern College in Kansas and Oklahoma State, where she earned her Ph.D. in economics by asking, “Do prisons pay?” She taught economics at Denison University before joining the Department of Criminal Justice at NMSU. She has published three books, including *Publish & Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar*. She has been honored at New Mexico State and nationally with eight awards for teaching or service. Tara has presented faculty development workshops to 10,000 participants at more than 120 venues, in thirty-five states, and in Thailand, Guatemala, Mexico, Canada, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Tara.

**TG**: Thanks so much for having me. It’s a delight to be here.

**KL**: So Tara, I actually reached out to because we had a listener question that I thought you could help me answer. So I want to go ahead and read that first. So we got an email from Jordan and Jordan said:

“One topic that I think may be helpful is someone from a Center for Teaching and Learning. I don't know much about what kinds of things they generally do that might be helpful for me as a faculty member. Also, I think an episode about what to do/how to cope when you are a junior faculty without significant research coaching/guidance/support from senior faculty at your institution. Leaning on your doctoral school and dissertation chair are not bad ideas, but perhaps there are other tactics too. This is especially true, I suppose, if you find yourself at a non-Ph.D. granting and less than research focused institution.”

So Tara, I thought that you would be an excellent guest to have on because you have experience in what we call “faculty development”—we’ll get into a little bit more about that in a second—but also I know you are leading writing programs at your institution, you’ve written a book on productive writing, and you’re a frequent speaker on this topic. So, to kick us off, Tara, I’m wondering if we can start just by talking a little bit about faculty development, which is a field where a Center for Teaching and Learning might be housed. So, for our listeners who may not know, what is faculty development?

**TG**: Well, faculty development has meant a lot of different things across what Sorcinelli and her team of authors, *Creating the Future of Faculty Development*, call the four ages of faculty development. And I’ll just start with the first age and end with the last age. The first age, it meant—in the age of the scholar, they call it—it meant sabbaticals and money to go to conferences in your discipline. That was the original meaning of faculty development. But then faculty development centers were developed and they helped expand faculty development outside of your discipline and across disciplines and in that age—our current age—we think about faculty development in terms of instructional development where we help faculty teach better. Faculty development, which is broader. We help faculty do anything they need to do, like time management or scholarship or whatever. And organizational development where we try to make the organization friendlier to faculty.

**KL**: So typically on a campus we see what Jordan asked about which is faculty development happening maybe through a Center for Teaching and Learning or some other kind of organized unit. And this is something that is part of my background as well. I used to work at a faculty development unit and Tara, you’re currently housed in a faculty development unit as well, correct?

**TG**: That’s right.

**KL**: What are some of the support structures that you find faculty developers are offering specifically to faculty researchers?

**TG**: Three come to mind. One is accountability structures, where the faculty development center sometimes pays for you to go to a group like AcademicLadder.com and log in your minutes and get a little graph that shows your minutes across time and write about your daily writing like, “I’m stuck on the lit review. Gee, I think I’ll never get out.” And you write to them every day and a couple of times a week they write you back. So they might help with accountability by doing something like that. They might hire a writing coach for you. Sorcinelli at University of Massachusetts has hired writing coaches. I don’t know if they’re still doing that, but they have. And they, the last time that I looked, they had a list of writing coaches on their website there at the center. And finally, they offer, many of us offer writing retreats. There’s a caveat with writing retreats because it can lead to binge writing—writing more than two or three hours in a row—but I still run them. They’re very popular. I’m running on this week. And I run them so that people can write with the synergy of writing while others write. So getting everybody in one room, fingers on keyboards, has a magical effect on people and they turn out more stuff than they can shake a stick at.

**KL**: So this is something that early career researchers or really researchers at any stage might want to look around their campus to see if there is a Center for Teaching and Learning or a faculty development office that’s offering these kinds of support structures. I know that these offices too also offer different kinds of programming. And this is actually how I first met you, Tara, is at my previous university we actually brought you in to run some sessions for our faculty and this is something that you have a lot of experience with, working with faculty about productivity. Are there others kinds of programming, aside from bringing in an outside speaker or facilitator, that you know faculty development offices are using to help faculty be more productive writers?

**TG**: Yes, there’s three kinds I’d like to talk about. The first is writing groups where you just form a group and ask people in that group to bring, typically, to bring their work to be reviewed by others in the group. That’s the typical use of writing groups though I’ve seen them do other things like offer support. I’ve seen some of them what you would call a writing support group where they get together typically once a month and just talk about how’s it going as a writer, what have you got out, how often are you writing, etc. And I’ve also seen writing groups where you write like a writing retreat during the group. So everybody’s on their keyboards. But the typical writing group is a group for feedback and I’ve seen those done to great effect. I run writing groups on a variety of different strategies here.

And also I’ve seen one time workshops be very effective with somebody on your campus speaking rather than, as you mentioned, an outside speaker. Say an editor, somebody who has experience as a academic journal editor can give a one time writing workshop on, say, working with editors through the publication process, or selecting a journal or something like that.

And finally, there’s semester-long writing programs. For example, you could do, or your faculty developer more accurately, could do a whole semester out of Wendy Belcher’s book *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*. And in that session each week you would bring a more developed version of a journal article until you had the whole journal article at the end of that 12 weeks. Or at least that’s the goal depending on where you started.

**KL**: Yeah, long time listeners of “Research in Action” may remember that our episode one was actually with Wendy Belcher talking about her book *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*, which I think is a really great resource for both faculty developers and faculty who are trying to form a writing group or just trying to develop a regular writing practice to get a journal article out. We’re going to take a brief break. When we come back, we’re going to hear more from Tara about writing and research accountability. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 2:

**KL**: Tara, you have so much experience working with faculty writers. I’m wondering if you can tell us a little bit about what can a new scholar do to really pump themselves up to write?

**TG**: Well, if you’re like a lot of writers, you find writing difficult, and if you find writing difficult, then you have to tell yourself that you’re not alone. The Higher Ed Research Institute, better known as HERI, studies this phenomenon and in their studies they find that among faculty at four year institutions, 28% have not published a manuscript in the last two years. That’s pretty remarkable to me.

**KL**: Wow. It is.

**TG**: 28%. And even more enlightening is that almost 50% of faculty members spend four hours or fewer each week on their research.

**KL**: That’s incredible.

**TG**: So that tells me—and that’s their research, they’re not even dividing research from writing as far as I can tell. So it doesn’t take many hours a week to compete with the typical scholars. So I’d tell myself, I can do this, busy as I am, and you can do this, busy as you are.

**KL**: I think that, you know, that positive self-talk of I know I can do this, if other people can do this, I can do this too, is a huge component of being a productive writer. I think that negative self-talk is definitely a factor that can impact scholarly productivity. I’ve read a little bit about that in the research. What are some other factors you’ve found that affect scholarly productivity?

**TG**: Well the big three, besides self-confidence, are writing daily, having a revision system as a opposed to a non-system, and sharing work with others before submission. And I’d like to say a little bit about each if I could.

**KL**: I think we should go into a little bit of depth with each one.

**TG**: With writing daily, most people can’t say, “ok, tomorrow I’m going to start writing daily.” It’s not enough of a support. But if you’ll keep records and share those records with someone, preferably by shooting them an email with “45” in the subject line to indicate 45 minutes or zero or 15 or 10, whatever you were able to do that day. You can shoot someone an email like that and have them shoot you one back when they write or not. Maybe they can just encourage you. Depending on whether it’s another writer or not. My person is a writer and I like to shoot that email that says here are my minutes and receive one and know that there’s somebody out there that cares whether I wrote today or not.

Then for a revision system, I once managed to spend three years and a hundred hours a page on an article, my first, and I realized at the end of it, this is not a revision system. This is a non-system. I was reading it to make it better and reading it again to make it better and reading it again to make it better. Well that’s, that’s a recipe for disaster as you can see. So I decided that we need revision systems and the one I recommend in my book is recommended by other people as well, but I think I’ve probably developed it the most of anybody I’ve seen. And that is writing around topic or key sentences. It sounds so simple, like it’s almost insulting, but if you look at academic prose and John Bean is a writing expert at Seattle University says the same thing I say about this. And he says when he works with faculty, the number one thing that’s missing is topic sentences. And that is my experience too. So what I like to do is find one in every paragraph and I don’t mean piece one together from several difference sentences. I mean find one that says what you want to talk about in one sentence. And then line those up from your whole paper and read them to see if they’re logical, and by that I mean organized and coherent. So if they meet that criteria, then you can ask yourself, does every key sentence communicate the purpose to the audience? And if it does, then you’ve got a paper and now you’re ready to share your work with others. But until you’ve got a system, you need to get a system.

**KL**: That’s such a crucial tip because I think one of the challenges for early researchers and, to be honest, probably mid-career and senior researchers as well, is that we’ll kind of make mental leaps because we know it so well as we’re writing it we just kind of assume other people know it as well. And when you do that exercise with the topic sentences, you can actually start to see the gaps in your own thinking and where you’ve left something out. And I think that that’s such a key practice to make a regular part of your writing and your revision experience.

**TG**: It’s just another lens to see your work and those lenses do let us see the gaps like you say. And the third of the three is to share work with others before submission. It’s too slow and it’s too painful to get feedback from anonymous reviewers only. It’s too slow, so you’ve got your paper out there too long waiting for publication and you just don’t have the time to spare. Like I had the seven rejections. We’ll if I’d sent it to each of those journals and waited, that would have been way to long. And also what they say is ugly because your paper’s not in very good shape. So you can double your readership of reviewers by sharing it with just three people before publication. And if share with just those three, you can knock out a lot of the problems that the first three readers would have seen before it even goes to the journal.

**KL**: I love that tip. I think that it can feel very vulnerable and scary to send out your work, but wouldn’t you rather send what you can in its best quality to a journal versus, you know, and having at least one person outside of yourself take a look at it. It’s going to go to reviewers anyway, you’re going to get the feedback anyway. Why not get it early and from someone that you trust and respect?

**TG**: Yes. I think so. And I’ve heard it said that, “well, I have co-authors, so I don’t need these readers.” Co-authors are too close to the material to count as external readers So to me you need co-authors, often, but you also need external readers. And I think you need three kinds of readers, at least one in each category and preferably two. And that’s non-experts, people outside your discipline. So if you’re a sociologist, another sociologist, excuse me, anything but a sociologist. If you’re a chemical engineer, anything but a chemical engineer. And these people are who you ask for help with clarity and organization and you don’t just say, “Is it clear?” or “Is it organized?” because of course they’ll say “It looks good.” And, of course, that’s not what you want to hear, you want help, so what I like to do is say “what three places are least clear and why?” “What three places could be better organized and why?” And then I really get help from my non-experts on clarity and organization which is where they can help you. They even ask you to define your terms. Imagine that. Because they’re like, “you’re using this word and it’s a word that people would need to know what you mean by it.”

**KL**: You raise such an important point about directing your reviewers and asking them for what they can give you that will help you to move the paper forward. I see a lot of junior faculty seek out mentorship or review, I mean, just colleagues, not even junior faculty, but I think it’s more inexperienced writers who will say “can you read this and give me feedback?” and it’s just very nebulous. And I think that when someone gets a request like that, they don’t know how long it’s going to take. They don’t know the level of quality of the piece. Whereas, if you ask for very specific things, you know, can you make out my argument? Is my argument clear throughout the paper? Or, as you’re pointing out, where are the points where things are unclear? The three main areas that I need to work on, that kind of thing. It gives the reviewer something to organize their thoughts around and I think it also makes it easier to respond to your request and to say, “Yes, I will review it for you.”

**TG**: Yes. It does make it easier to say yes and what you’re going to get back is going to be so much more valuable than the traditional “it looks good.” How much time does it take to say, “it looks good”?

**KL**: Absolutely.

**TG**: So the second group I’ll say the least about, that’s the experts. If you’re a sociologist, any other sociologist. If you’re a chemical engineer, any other chemical engineer. You can treat them as non-experts or as capital E experts which I’ll describe in a minute. It doesn’t matter to me. If would depend how well you know them, how long you’ve worked on the paper, how close they are to your area. It would depend on a lot of things whether you would treat them as a non-expert or a capital E expert. But the capital E experts are the people that you cite the most often or the most heavily or both. And when I write to these folks, I like to explain that I’m asking for a quick read of only 20 minutes. I say “just run your eyes over it and tell me the biggest problems you see. I’m not asking for a detailed read with copious comments.” I also like to ask what I should read and cite that I haven’t and to which journal would you send the manuscript. Even when I have one in mind, maybe they have a better idea or maybe mine will reject it. Or maybe they will show me what they think of the manuscript by telling me which journal to send it to.

**KL**: Those are such great tips.

**TG**: It’s a way to get a good sense of do they think it’s a good paper or not because if they recommend an unheard of journal in an unheard of country you know they didn’t like it.

**KL**: Well this is—I love the concreteness of your tips and it’s so practical and so straightforward to think about writers can do to engage other readers and to receive effective feedback on their work. We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back we’re going to hear about some more concrete writing tips from Tara. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 3:

**KL**: Tara, one of the things that you recommend is that writers log their time writing. And I’m wondering if you can talk about methods to do this, if you recommend a certain way of logging this, and also what kinds of information that people should include in that writing log?

**TG**: Well, I’m a minimalist, so I want to spend all of my time writing, writing on my paper, so I just write my minutes that I start—it’s kind of like a ritual with me—like 11:02 I put on a sticky note. And I use that sticky note for one week. And then when I finish, 15 minutes later on that first day, I write 11:17 down. And then I total those all up at the end of the week and send them to my partner. Now once a week is enough for me because I’ve been doing this since 1998 but if you’re doing this for the first time, I would really recommend that you put it—and it’s find to put it on a sticky note—but put it in an email and send it that day so that you get instant feedback from your person “good job!” or you get their minutes back or something back because we need more support than we think we need as scholars. Anything that’s important but not urgent gets ignored and writing journal articles is a perfect example of important but not urgent. That is, it moves us closer to our goals, it’s important, but there’s no deadlines or people involved to make us move quickly. Like knocking on the door or sending us an email, there’s no external prompt, “hey, you’ve got to write!” So for that reason we need to take action ourselves and set up accountability structures. Now Dannelle Stevens I believe has been on the show and she talks about how if you journal more, you’ll write more and that’s absolutely true. Writing daily will make you write more by a huge margin and journaling will make you write more by a huge margin. And so I would love to see people write more in their journals than I do, because I just write minutes, but if you’re willing to say “I’m stuck on the methods section. It feels like a list to me. I don’t know how to make it sing.” Whatever. If you’re willing to do that kind of journaling, you can join academicladder.com which I mentioned earlier and for a few hundred dollars you can develop a lifetime habit of writing daily.

**KL**: We will link to that in the show note and also to Dannelle’s episode. I’m also happy to share a writing log template that I used to give out to faculty who were in writing groups with me. And one of the things that we encouraged people to write down too was just, when you start your writing session, what are you hoping to do and then at the end of it, what did you get done? And this also helps you to kind of figure out what’s realistic, you know, if you only have 15 minutes and you’re like, oh, I’m going to write a full draft of my paper and then you don’t write the full draft of your paper and you feel disappointed in yourself it helps you to manage your own expectations and to train yourself about what you can really get done in relatively short periods of time. I think that this is something that a lot of people—I’ve heard a lot of people say to me I can ‘t write in 15 minutes a day—they want that binge writing, those multiple hours and I think that sometimes that’s just not, we don’t have that. And so if you want to start a daily writing practice, logging not only the time your spending, but also what you want to accomplish and how much you’re getting accomplished can help with that, help set your expectations a little bit better.

**TG**: Yes. Yes, I couldn’t agree more.

**KL**: So one of the things you recommend, Tara, is writing from the first day of your writing project and I love this advice. I’m wondering if you can talk a little more about it. Because there might be people who say, “I’m not sure what to write.” If they don’t know the direction of their project or maybe they don’t have the information they think they need, what are some of the things they can do to write their way into their project a bit?

**TG**: Well, I said I don’t journal, but I do keep one journal, it’s called “article topics.” And in “article topics” I write about all my ideas for what I could write about. And every time I have an idea I put it in “article topics.” And then when I complete a project, I let myself journal, just to myself, just a letter to myself, that’s what I mean by journaling. Dear Tara, I could write about this. I could write about that. And I usually list about ten things. And then later, the next day I might write a paragraph about three of the most promising. And the next day I might write two pages about the most promising. So I narrow my topic by listing them and then writing about them. Even very short paragraphs will show you which one’s a bang up idea and which one’s a B- idea. And then, once I’ve got an idea, I write a zeroeth draft.

It’s an idea from Babbs and Tacker—very old article, 1985 I think—and they talk about how you should write a zeroeth draft before you begin your study or experiment. The way I try to approach it is I write from what I feel and know, from what I think I might find, and I leave little blanks to fill in later. Need sentence here. Need quotation here. Need opposing point of view here. Need supporting point of view there. And then I read to write rather than to learn. I think we all got stuck—that comes from a book by Linda Flower by the same name *Reading to Write*—we write, we read as if we were going to do it to learn. And we will learn while we read, there’s nothing wrong with learning while you read, but you’re reading to fill in the blanks of your already written zeroeth draft and then once you’ve filled in those blanks including the results section, you’ve got a first draft and it will be so much of a better first draft than if you hadn’t written the zeroeth draft. Babbs and Tacker say that you will find that it improves the questions that you ask and the methods with which you address them.

**KL**: I love that tip. I do a similar kind of writing, but I refer to it as “layering.” I do a first layer and then I layer things in like quotations and evidence and data and maybe that’s my zeroeth draft is starting that first layer. I think it’s too much pressure to think that we’ll sit down and write something our and it will be perfect. I think it’s something that we talked about in our episode with Kevin Gannon who came on the show to talk about balancing teaching and research. He talked about writing every day and that if we think that what we have to write every day is polished, it’s not going to motivate us to write every day, it’s going to intimidate us. I think that the idea of a zeroeth draft or of layering makes it so that you’re writing doesn’t have to be perfect when it comes out the first time.

**TG**: Yep. Far from it. Far from it.

**KL**: So one of the things that we had talked about a little bit earlier. We know that writing groups or writing partners can help us with writing productivity. What is your advice for choosing a good writing group member or a good writing partner?

**TG**: You want somebody that is committed. Very, very committed. Because most people on the planet think they’re too busy for writing groups. It’s not the occasional writer who says I believe the process will lead to a more outstanding product. And you want either a partner or a group of writing group members who believe that that process will really transform the product.

**KL**: Absolutely. And I think the hardest things for folks joining writing groups is that they can fall apart as soon as people stop showing up, stop engaging, stop submitting work. It’s pretty easy to have people fall off that commitment so I think that’s just such great advice.

Tara, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and sharing so much of your expertise about writing productivity and research accountability. Thank you.

**TG**: Well thank you for hosting me, it was my pleasure.

**KL**: And also, I want to thank Jordan for giving us this initial question that prompted this episode. Jordan, I hope this tell you a little bit more about Centers for Teaching and Learning and also what to do and how to cope when you’re a junior faculty without significant research coaching, guidance, or support from senior faculty at your institution.

Thanks always to our listeners for joining us for this week of “Research in Action.” I’m Katie Linder and I’ll be back next week with a new episode.

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# Bonus Clip # 1:

[Intro music]

**KL**: In this first bonus clip for episode 18 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Tara Gray shares how her book *Publish and Flourish*, came to be. Take a listen.

Another fantastic resource, Tara, is that I know you have written a book, *Publish and Flourish*, which is actually one of the earliest books I remember reading as a graduate student when I was trying to work on my writing productivity and get some things out the door. Can you tell us a little bit about this book and what led you to write it?

**TG**: Well, I was led to write it because I was teaching Writing Across the Curriculum workshops. So I was teaching faculty how to teach students how to write and I usually had an attendance of about 15 and in those workshops I discovered that faculty were not using the approaches I was teaching in their own writing. They were like, “yeah, I should try that sometime.” And that was kind of scary to me, so I offered a workshop—I believe it was 7 hours in those days—I offered a workshop called “Publish and Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar” and 60 academics showed up. Well I was used to 15, so 60 was a little shocking, so I thought I had struck a chord.

And the other thing that made me write *Publish and Flourish* was I was kind of stuck one week. My kids were in space camp at a neighboring school and I was in their library for 40 consecutive hours and I thought, why don’t I write down the steps that I take—at that time I wanted it to be ten tips, ten tips for how I write when I’m writing at my most effective. And I pounded out—it turned out to be 12 steps, rather than ten tips—I pounded out 12 steps for how I write when I’m writing at my best. It wasn’t a very good article. I won’t tell you where it was published, but it was an article. And I was rejected seven times so the world agreed that it wasn’t very good. They said I would never find—well they said there was no one who needed to know the stuff in my article. And it’s kind of funny because it’s the only thing I’ve written that every had a wide audience. But it wasn’t very well done and it was rejected seven times, but I persisted using a technique I recommend in the book called querying and in querying you ask the editor, “would you be interested in an article like this one?” and you provide the abstract and attach the paper. You don’t actually submit it and you don’t have to wait two or three months for a response.

So because I was querying, in five weeks I had seven rejections and one acceptance and I was done. Otherwise the book would have come out before the article.

KL: I love that story. I think that a huge part of academic publishing is actually resilience. And we will definitely link to the book in the show notes if we have listeners interested in checking it out. It’s definitely one that is on my permanent writing productivity to-read pile as I always cycle back to these things when I feel like I need them the most.

You’ve just heard a bonus clip for episode 18 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Tara Gray sharing about how her book *Publish and Flourish*, came to be. Thanks for listening!

# Bonus Clip # 2:

**KL**: In this second bonus clip for episode 18 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Tara Gray shares about how she engages experts for feedback on her work. Take a listen.

**TG**: I always like to approach capital E experts for help with my papers. It may sound bold and it certainly was when I started. I remember Joe Williams at the University of Chicago wrote dozens of books that went into dozens of languages and so forth and I had written my first paper on writing and I had cited him heavily and I wanted to have a relationship with him. And so I wrote to him.

“Dear Dr. Williams, I am nobody and nothing at nowheresville and nothingsville and I’m writing to you the great Joe Williams, would you please respond to my first paper on writing?” Which did take some gall, I must admit. And he wrote back, “Sure! If you would respond to three chapters of my latest book as enclosed.”

So it taught me a lesson that I can communicate with the people that I’m citing and if I tailor a letter to them individually explaining how that person’s work informed mine and asking specific questions aimed at the intersection of their work and mine, they will write back about 50% of the time.

And I’ve kept some informal statistics and if I pass it to the neighbor in my department, they will read it at about a 50% rate. So total strangers, very well known, will read at the same rate as your neighbor next door.

**KL**: You’ve just heard a bonus clip for episode 18 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Tara Gray sharing about how she engages experts for feedback on her work. Thanks for listening!

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