Episode 111: Mike Caulfield

# KL: Katie Linder

# MC: Mike Caulfield

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and eleven.

# [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. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by Mike Caulfield, director of blended networked learning at Washington State University Vancouver and head of the Digital Polarization Initiative. In these roles Mike is changing the way that digital literacy is taught. His current initiative with AASCU, American Democracy Project, combines a grass roots approach to pedagogical change with a formal eleven school pilot. Testing new modes of teaching civic online literacy.

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

**MC:** Oh my pleasure.

**KL**: So I am really interested in this initiative you are a part of called the Digital Polarization Initiative. What is it? For folks who may have not heard of it yet.

**MC**: Ah well it’s a there is really three parts to it. The first is that we teach students to what we call “90 second fact check”, on stuff that they find online via there feeds or email or web searches. And we actually believe that we can have students make considerably better judgements about whether something is true or false or in-between in just 90 seconds training. The second piece of that is that we facilitate discussion and thinking about the ways in which social media, online culture, and “the like” influences how we think, how we socialize in our civic life. For better and for worse. We try to talk about some of the larger structural issues they are everything from house supplement cites, promote health disinformation to what a bot looks like and why recognizing a bot might be important. To the ways in which YouTube can radicalize you on any subject. You know so looking at some of those larger social issues. And then the third piece is intervention getting students to think about how they might be more deliberate, thoughtful and you know ethical in their use of social media.

So that wraps what sounds like a tall order, but it actually all wraps up into a curriculum we are putting together and delivering in a formal way. Delivering to eleven different campuses in the American Association of state colleges and Universities, American Democracy project. The longest title of a project I think, not ever but um a considerable long title for a project. So we are working with eleven universities formally to deliver this curriculum and assess its impact. We are also working with dozens of universities informally helping to guide development to similar curricula at their institutions.

**KL**: So this sounds really exciting I definitely want to dig into a little bit more about the pilot testing. But first I am curious about just what lead you to develop this initiative? I mean what where the kind of key things that pointed you in this direction?

**MC**: Yeah so this is a long time interest. I mean I was an online political activist going back to 2006, there is actually a Wall Street dot portrait of me talking about how blogs are going to change the world and make power more accountable and things that feel a little weird now 10 years later. But it intersected with my academic work. My job is actually helping faculty thinking about how to use digital tools and literacies in the classroom.

Back in 2009 at Keen State, we developed our first digital literacies outcomes for the college. And then after that I was involved with AASCU’s eCitizenship project where we looked at this issues and tried to figure out what skills do citizens need in the digital realm to be fully engaged with our new civic life. And then that kind of trailed off around 2013, that project terminated and I went into researching other things and um reading other initiatives. But, during primary season in 2016 I just noticed a lot of very smart people I knew where posting some things that were easily disproved. Stuff that was from hoax sites or stuff that was wildly mislabeled in the title and I thought you know maybe it is time to return to this. Well we had initially done this in 2009, 2010, and 2013, with the uses of the eCitizenship project. I think people still thought that eCitizenship was about how do you be a citizenship of the online world right. And we were pushing a different idea which is that eCitizenship is really about your citizen of other things already. How do your skills or lack of skills your predispositions the platforms you use, how do they affect your citizenship in the place in which you are already a citizen. And people weren’t ready to see this at that point, but people are quite ready to see that now.

**KL**: Okay, so I am really interested in this pilot tests so let’s dig in a little bit. I am curious with these eleven schools, what are the kinds of things you are looking for to help you verify that this curriculum is effective or to maybe look for gaps in the curriculum that you know you what to fill?

**MC**: Yeah so we’re being very pointed about what we are testing so a lot of institutions are offering aboard semester long treatments of this or offering modules that are a month or more in these things. We are and this is partially on the advice of Sam Wineberg at Stanford who has been advising us. We are targeting two weeks of instruction we are targeting a very small intervention, two weeks of instruction. And it’s primarily on that first piece of it the “90 second fact checks”, right. So we are looking to see if two weeks of instructions can significantly improve student’s faculty with sorting through fiction on the web, recognizing material that might be sponsored by money versus sorting out material that is published by newspapers versus policy think tanks. Making sure the students are actually going to the source of claims instead of looking at the reporting and re-reporting and re-reporting of an opinion of a press release about a study.

So we are looking at this very small set of fact checking training that we are giving students in that two week period. In the assessments we are using is based on the assessments that Sam and his group down at the Stanford history education group have put together and validated. These are assessments that are tests the skills in an authentic context, they test the students on real web questions were the students are allowed to use the full web. And we found at least tests with students with no training they do quite poorly on these. You can look up Sam’s work on that if you type in Stanford and Civic online reasoning.

The structure of the test, this is “Research in Action” maybe people are interested in this. The structure of the test is that you have a pre and a post and those have to be different. Different questions and sense they have to be different we have an um cross over design were we give half the students one task and half the students the other task. Then we swap them up for the posttest so that we make sure we are not simply looking at the relative difficultly of two tasks, right. That we are filtering that out. The post test is since it is supposed to look at retention of the skills, the post test is going to be administered four weeks after the last instruction so we are not. So we are actually checking some of the durability of the skill versus looking at something the students may have just completed a couple days before. And the idea of the its not I don’t think we except to publish what we are looking to see is whether A whether this curriculum has some measure impact. But because we have 11 institutions there is also going to be some variability in the interventions and so we are looking to see what we might be able to find out for the instances where we see a lot of impact. Where we can dig out to make that instruction successful.

**KL**: Okay this is super fascinating. So I am really interested to know how you work with the digital polarization initiative is impacting or informing your own practices.

**MC**: Yeah so once you start to work with this you see it everywhere. And its um which can make it unfortunate because you can never shut it off. You know there is a couple ways in which it has influenced my own practices. The first thing that I have done is that I have always been pretty good with these skills but I have realized that even when. Even with a pretty good facility and skills by being really reflective about when we look at what we teach students we have to think. And Sam has been sort of relentlessness with us on this to quite a good effect. We have to think not only what is a way you can do this, but what is the fastest way, what is the most efficient way , what is the set of tools and techniques for fact checking the is most likely to get you to the best result the quickest. Not just a result in a relatively quick time, the best result the quickest. Because you got to be really selective about what you teach especially if we are trying to do it in two weeks.

So one of the things I have found is that it has improved my skills as well. It has made me much more efficient when I look at things it has made me much more adapt to so a quick fact check. Even on a simple article that I am retweeting or sharing with people. And it’s also I think broaden my own horizons a bit. One of the surprising pieces of this is that we find it is not really just about gullibility with students, people are posting a lot of things that are fake that are actual true. It’s about the ways in which we look at a lot of things and assume they must be fake and over stated when they turn out to actually be true. We are filtering out things that are outside of our political ideology in assuming “Oh that is click bait” “That can’t be true”, and you know we click through and find. I use one example when I talk to faculty there is a picture that was like snow in the Sahara… Al Gore. And of course the presentation of that you know is broadly anti-scientific relating climate to individual weather events and broadly polemical in a way that is not helpful. But of course my mind looks at that and my mind also thinks that the snow in the Sahara is fake. That this is a fake image. And so normally I would just let that go and not do anything with it, it’s very easy for us to label things as fake or suspect because then we don’t have to a put in any cognitive effort. And so now that I do this, and I do this repeatedly and I have gotten very quick at it I take a look and it turns out actually yeah it snowed in the Sahara. Twice in the past two years a pretty rare event.

But does that change the fact that climate change is happening? No, it doesn’t change that. But it does change the fact that I learned something that’s really neat you know [*Laughs*]. That’s kind of cool and looked a bit into why is this happening and why is the weather patterns shifting. And learning a little deeper into that um some of the history of climate changes in the Sahara which of course have had broad implications to the development of civilization itself. So it’s not just about you know can I spot something that is fake and ignore it. It is also about can I stop ignoring it things that might be interesting, because they fall outside my usual you know zone of comfort.

**KL:** Well thank you for sharing your process, Mike. I think this is something that will help other people to kind of think about when they are out and you know trolling the interwebs - what are the things that they want to be looking at?

We are going to take a brief break when we come back we will hear a little bit more from Mike about his passions around sharing and using. Back in a moment!

[*Music plays in background*]

In addition to producing the “Research in Action” podcast, as the research director at Oregon State University Ecampus. I am fortunate to developing original teaching and learning research projects. A recent one I am excited to share with you is an online learning ethical database, which allows users to explore the learning outcomes of online and hybrid education environments are equivalent to face-to-face environments. This tool supports faculty in comparing course modalities and making the assessments of the outcomes of studies. Learn more about the database at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/research-database

# Segment 2:

**KL**: Mike, you have a passion for both sharing and reusing. And we see this in a lot of different content you produce and things that you are talking about. What interests you about this access of digital discourse?

**MC**: Yeah, so I have been in the open education for a long time even before we called it an open education. My first open pedagogy project was in 1997, in 1999 I set up a site to share book domain materials with a teachers are reuse in the classroom. And for a while, I really though the solution around open education was a problem of production and sharing. That the big problem was that we have to have more awareness and sharing the materials produced and we got to have more people sharing those materials. And I think there is definitely problems there we need high quality materials we need a people to think more about sharing, and I try to encourage faculty to share both their academic work and their pedagogical materials.

However, when I worked for the open courseware consortium back in 2008, I started to realize that we might have some of this is wrong. That really we make heroes of people who build things and share things, all good behavior, but it’s as hard to reuse things as to share them. The natural instinct we have when we hit a problem is, “you know what? I will just go do it myself—I’ll just make my own thing.” And it takes a special gift and a special sort of humility to, instead of just running off and doing your own thing, to build on someone else’s thing and work through some of the issues, and try to extend it.

So part of what I was trying to do in the open education community was instead of constantly glorifying and deifying the creators um give some love and support and maybe some money to the people who are working hard to reuse and adapt these works. And at the time I think that was a fairly unique position in open education. I think overtime it has become more understood that it’s the support for the users it is really going to create this sort of community and reuse those impacts that we need.

**KL**: So Mike, I am wondering if you can talk a little bit about what are some of the benefits of reuse? For people who are thinking along the lines of what you said earlier “I just want to do it myself” “I want to make sure that it is right” “It is exactly what I need”. When you look at the concept of reuse what are some of the things that can come out of that, that would be beneficial?

**MC:** Well, I meanthe big thing of course is you end up in the community right. If you go off and do it alone and everybody just fires off the things that they’ve built, maybe you end up with a product that works with what you want to do. But you don’t end up with a community that supports that product right? So, this is something I think people don’t think about enough is that yes the process of working to adapt something is hard and maybe in the short term the gains aren’t there. But when I actually work with people and collaborate on common shared materials and when other people work with common shared materials. They walk away not only with a new product, but they walk away now plugged into a community that can support them both in their teaching and in future creation of materials. And maybe also just in the morale that one needs to constantly tackle these sorts of questions on these sorts of budgets that we have.

And so I think that is what people miss about reuse is that there are two products of reuse. And one product is the actual thing you make, but the second product is the community that you come into and build around that product. And that’s the piece that is going to take your teaching and maybe your research to the next level.

**KL**: So, let’s shift into talking about research a little bit. Because I think sometimes when people hear sharing and reusing in a research context it makes them a little bit nervous, but I think we also know from things like open science and even just replication studies. That these are things that are really built into the core of some of the things we currently do in research communities. What do you think that sharing means for researchers and research communities?

**MC**: Well I really like informal sharing. I mean so there’s…the way academia is structured I mean there is some serious reputational hits that a person gets if they haven’t dotted all the I’s and crossed all the T’s and if they make mistakes. There is something that is very useful about that in certain types of research. I mean we want research to be rock solid when it comes out of a journal or something like that. But you know there is people all over the planet that have pieces of answers to questions that you are asking already. But nobody has had enough pieces to assemble that into an article. So that is part of the idea of open science and open book science and some of these other movements is to get the ideas out there which are not completely finished. And, again, to partially to create the community that can eventual produce the finished work.

I will give you an example. And this isn’t quite open research, but it is an example of what can happen. I read Sam Wineberg’s article on um just after the election. His article on civic online reasoning in K12 and early undergrads. And I wrote a piece on it, I wrote a blog piece on it called “Yes digital literacy, but which one”. And it went through and it talked about you know what they found and how that intersected with what we had found in our years of looking at digital literacies with students right. But stuff I had never really written down anywhere just how it intersected with what he found and how I though and what I though it actually told us on these issues. And I get a message from Human from cheg, and what they say is you know this is one of the best analyses of our work that we have seen today we should talk. So we start to talk. And so they have a bunch of research on their side and I have a bunch of experience in helping to train faculty to teach these skills. And I know where some of the traps are and what we have seen over the years. And they end up being two sides of the same question. I think that relationship that we form based out of a blog post you know took me about three hours to write. Has ended up being incredibility valuable to both me and to my institution as we have gone through this process. But it would have never happened if I thought, you know, what I should do is sit down and write a journal article that will be published in 18 months. That builds on insights and the work of ethic. I mean it would have never happened in that environment.

And so again I just keep coming back to this. The point of being open in a lot of ways is not just what you produce it’s the community that comes out of that. And the way that community is much more agile and responsive to the needs that the traditional closed publishing system.

**KL**: I love that story because I think it is the perfect example of you don’t always know what is going to happen with the stuff you put out into the world. You know like who is going to respond? [MC: Yeah you don’t!] Yeah it’s.

**MC**: Or even how valuable it is right? I mean that just kills me is very often you read this thing and that thing on a certain subject. And you know you miss what you feel is a major point. But then you talk to somebody at a conference and they say “Oh yeah I have been thinking about writing a paper on this issue for years. That goes and talks about how so forth and some data that we have here”. And you are like “This is the paper I have been waiting for someone to publish for five years” [*laughs*] And you know it’s in your drawer you know. So, yeah exactly and they don’t realize that it’s valuable. And that’s the main thing about openness that people have to understand probably outside of the community issue. Is part of being open is realizing that you don’t necessarily know which things you know are the most valuable to other people. And so going to a default openness sometimes allows you to realize ideas that you have and you think are not particularly valuable to you turn out to be incredibly valuable to others.

**KL:** Okay I want to shift to thinking about what reusing might mean for researchers and research communities. We talked about sharing, let’s talk about reusing.

**MC**: Yeah so…[*chuckles*] I mean it could mean a number of things in terms of research. One way to think about. I will give you an example here from what we are doing now. Stanford History Education Group ran some stuff just doing very similar a very similar curriculum to what we are using down at San Jose State. And so they have their class materials outlined and they run them through this sequence. Um now I have some differences in how I would like to present this stuff. I have some differences of opinions and what works and what framing works. Um and again the tendency of us the general tendency in academia would be okay let’s do our invention and see if our intervention out performs their intervention. Right? You know that’s the path to glory I guess. But you know as we look through this I think we want to look at something that they were doing with their curriculum and pull it directly into ours and be a little its early into this be a little bit less quick to revise something. And why is that well partially because they are going to have data coming out of San Jose State on how this works. They are going to make hypothesis about why what worked, worked and why what failed, failed. So, it doesn’t make a whole bunch of sense for us to immediately create our own curriculum that can’t sort of carry forward that research. But like I said there is a little less glory in that because it is not like you know if you look at. They are sharing with me a google document of how they run there class. There is less glory in it because of course you know everybody wants to have their own sort of branded intervention. And prove it is the best but it is not clear to me that, that is the best way to advance practice.

Is that sort of what you are looking for?

**KL**: I think it is so interesting because part of what you are saying is that you have to set your ego aside when you reuse in any capacity, but in research in particular. There is this sense of you have to be willing to build on what someone else has done which seems really core to the research endeavor. But you are right people get rewarded from creating things from scratch, branding it to themselves, and being able to say I created this thing and this is how we know that it works.

**MC**: Yeah I mean you look at the beginning of any research paper and the first thing you have to do is make a defense of how no one has done what you have done [*laughs*]. You know the reason the research and the survey of research of the beginning is it’s there for a number of reasons. But part of what you are doing is you are trying to show that you are filling a gap here. You know? And you know I think that is important filling gaps is important, but um yeah it can also be important to uh advance someone else’s work. In a way that um if you think about it what we are trying to do really when we look at reconciling these two kind of different approaches of us the Stanford History Education Group. We are kind of trying to make it so that the results are I guess grokkable from each side of this. Does that make sense? That what we do will be similar enough to what they are doing that they will be able to pull back some of our insights into their work, right? And what they do will be similar enough to what we are doing that we are able to pull things back and forth. So just trying to keep the approach compatible enough that we can draw fairly directed insights from each other’s work.

**KL**: I love that idea of kind of thinking about not just going in one direction. You know you are not incrementally building and using someone else’s work just for the purpose of kind of moving your own work forward, but also so you can give back to the originator of the research. And see if you can move their work forward as well.

**MC**: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that is key and that’s reuse and it is also community, right.

**KL**: Absolutely. Well Mike you have given us so many good things to chew on here. I want to thank you so much for your time, for coming on this show, and sharing about your passion for the digital polarization initiative, but also your passion for sharing and reusing.

**MC:** Aw it was my pleasure. And I enjoyed talking to you.

**KL:** Thank you also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of “Research in Action.” I’m Katie Linder and we will be back next week, with a new episode.

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