Episode 122: Rebekah Willson

# KL: Katie Linder

# RW: Rebekah Willson

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

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a 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 today’s episode, I am joined by Dr. Rebekah Wilson, a lecturer in information science in the department computer and information sciences at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Originally from Canada, she obtain her Ph.D. from Charles Sturt University in Australia in 2016. Her dissertation focused on the experience of individuals transitioning from doctoral student to early career academic. Her main area of research is in information behavior, including what information individuals need and how they find, share, and use that information, particularly in the workplace. Her latest research examines the precarity in modern universities and the influence that has on the information behavior of academics on short term contracts. For more information and her CV, please go to rebekahwilson.com.

Thanks so much for joining me on the podcast today, Rebekah!

**RW**: Thanks for having me!

**KL:** So, I am super intrigued by your area of interest in information behavior and I would love to start off just by a quick definition, what is information behavior for people who may not be familiar with it?

**RW:** Information behavior is an interesting area, it kind of comes out of…well it’s in the field of information science which is sometimes also called library and information science. So, it has a bit of a different background and lots of people come to this area from different perspectives. So, the way that I typically tell people about information behavior is it’s looking at information and that’s very broad. It can be everything from the day to day things to the big sort of research questions that people have, you know, big and small, and it’s looking at what information do people actually need, how do they find it, how do they share it, and how do they use it, which is incredibly broad but it’s a real focus on information as a field rather than is just associated with the content of that information.

**KL:** So, you mentioned there are people coming at this from a lot of different angles and the library angle makes sense to me because librarians are helping people to find information in various ways, but it sounds very interdisciplinary as a field. What are some of the areas or disciplines that are kind of interested in these questions as well?

**RW:** So, lots of people come in from sort of more cognitive perspectives. So, you might have a psychology background, lots of people who are actually looking at particular behaviors, lots of people are also interested in technology. So, you’ll get a lot of sort of computer science people who are interested in different kinds of IT, you’ll also have people who are interested in communications. So, it can kind of branch out because it is a really broad sort of umbrella that pulls a lot of people together. There’s also people who study more sort of that um, sociological aspect of…particularly um, groups of people who tend to have practices in how they find and look for information.

**KL:** Ok, so I’m already fascinated! What led you to study in this particular area? Was there, you know, a particular question you wanted to follow? Or, you know, what brought you to what you’re studying now?

**RW:** So, I have an undergraduate degree in psychology and I was working with a supervisor on my honors dissertation who looked at how do people find information online, particularly around spelling. So, it was a developmental psychology research lab that looked at developmental spelling and at this point Google wasn’t quite as wonderful as it is now at giving spelling suggestions. And I…So, I did my undergrad in psychology and then I did a masters in information studies and I basically took the spelling study and starting applying it to technology in libraries, so looking at library catalogs and then realized, oh my goodness, there’ this whole other field that you could look at how people find information, but not just in the very traditional library sense of finding information but the broad sense of internet, and people, and everyday life, and all the things that they do. So, I kind of came to it in a bit of a different way than I think other people but um, the broadness of the field and all the things that you can sort of encapsulate, that was really what got me.

**KL:** Ok, so this field is super broad as you’re describing it. So, I want to dive into your specific or kind of primary research questions. So, what are you looking at? How are you narrowing this huge field in your own work?

**RW:** And that is actually one of the problems with the field is it can encapsulate everything. So, I have, at the moment been following more what people do at work. And actually, I’ve been looking at academics, which is always a problem if you stick too closely to academia but academics are actually very interesting people to look at and that’s sort of where my Ph.D. research started was looking at how academics who are early career and just starting out, making that transition from their doctoral program to that first sort of full time academic positions, how do they find information? And one of the things that I find really interesting is there are ways that you can um, sort of the way that I’ve narrowed things down is looking at people who are currently undergoing a transition because people come to a new job and they bring a lot of interesting experience, a lot of different ways of knowing, a lot of content, particularly I’m thinking of academics but when you put them in a new context, all of those everyday practical things that people do have to be figured out again. So, it’s, for me I’m really interested in people who are going through this sort of like unstable position where they’re making changes often. Um, the people I was looking at often moved countries, universities, cities, started new jobs, um, started new roles, all these things all at once and how do they actually figure out how to do their job, which is highly specified and that they’re well trained to do but actually the practical side of that.

**KL:** Ok, so, I want some examples of this practical side because I’m thinking if people are moving universities, they’re moving countries you know, like are we talking about finding information about things including like housing and, you know, like how to navigate in a new country language. Or is it really you’re focusing on kind of the workplace and, you know, establishing routines—they’re finding the information they need to kind of navigate in their professional realm, can you tell us more about that?

**RW:** So, the answer is yes, but I ended up focusing more on the actual workplace and it was one of those things where, when you have conversations with people—I…I had conversations that would last over an hour—and you’re just talking about the workplace and it was hard to, to include everything because people’s lives are so complex and so these are things I want to study in the future, but a lot of it is around the routines. How do people figure out in a new context? So, things like how do people figure out how to submit marks, how do people figure out how to get grants, particularly if you’re new to a country or an institution, or haven’t had previous grant experience? Who are the people that you go to for the everyday kinds of, you know, I need a printer code, as well as how do I…who do I talk to about thinking about career progression, and who should I be listening to, and who do I talk to these things about. So, It’s a lot of very broad and very narrow things as well and part of what I was quite surprised at in talking to people, which maybe I shouldn’t have been, but that the nitty-gritty of everyday life is what people end up focusing on because they simply can’t do their jobs if they don’t have email access. I have hours and hours of transcripts about people talking about financial management systems and trying to submit receipts for reimbursement because when you’re first starting out and you don’t have a lot of money those systems are really hard to navigate and people told me about hours of that…they spend doing these things and so then it’s how do people actually figure out how to navigate that in a system where a lot of universities have moved to this sort of, I call it “self-help”. It’s a lot of you put online information systems up there and then get people to do these things themselves.

**KL:** So, I’m curious to what degree you’re kind of approaching this from almost a user experience perspective of saying like, what are the things you have to do to kind of find this information versus perspective or maybe it’s…it’s a both/and where you’re kind of looking for patterns of… I can imagine, for example, there would be a lot of persistence and resilience that would have to come out when you’re trying to find information, especially if you’re in a new environment. What are kind of the angles you’re coming from to look at this information? What are you looking for when you’re interviewing people and start to code that data?

**RW:** I’m, I mean that’s an interesting perspective about user experience. One of the things I often don’t end up in that user experience per se mainly because technology might be the thing that we’re talking about, but it might not be and so my work crosses what did the things that came out so highly in what I was talking to people about was their colleagues, that for people colleagues were the real source of information. And as someone who comes from a librarian, you know, document focused kind of work. I was…I was a librarian in a previous life. I had really thought, oh the documents that universities put forward, the systems, these are going to be the policies, these are going to be more highly used and important and informal sources of information tend to be what people tend to go to and they go to colleagues, they go to the person whose office is next to them, the person who they trust. So, sometimes it’s a user perspective in you know, you ask people about how do they figure this out, what do they do with it, but it tends to cross over a whole lot of things because people say I just gave up on the system and then I went and talked to my neighbor who told me, “don’t bother with this, the policy says this,” but in actuality, this is what people do on the ground.

**KL**: So, you’re probably uncovering kind of hidden curriculum in a lot of ways about what they’re learning about how to access information?

**RW:** Absolutely, absolutely. And that to me is the really interesting stuff because the big stuff that are the sort of the ways that people have source preferences and the types of information systems they use, that’s all pretty standard and straightforward but when you start to actually peel those layers back there’s some really interesting things that people do.

**KL:** Well, we are going to continue to peel back the layers. We’ll take a brief break, when we come back we’re going to hear a little bit more from Rebecca about her work with grounded theory. Back in a moment!

In addition to producing the research in action podcast as the research director at Oregon State University eCampus I’m fortunate to work on developing original teaching and learning research projects. A recent one I’m excited to share with you is our online learning efficacy research database, which allows users to explore whether 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 assessments of the outcome of studies. Learn more about the database at eCampus.oregonstate.edu/research-database.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Rebecca I was really interested to see that part of your background in research has used grounded theory and this is something that we haven’t talked about on the show a ton and so I thought it would be a really fun conversation to have. So, first of all, for people who may not know, what is grounded theory?

**RW:** So, grounded theory is an approach, it’s a methodological approach that guides both how you collect the data and how you analyze the data, but it also is then the output of the analysis that you have a grounded theory. So, it’s a rigorous way of collecting data that is really, really close to what the participants are saying and what they’re meeting. You do analysis and data collection together very closely. So, you collect some data, and you analyze it, and you make assessments as you go about what you need to follow-up on, what things you need to change. Often there’s emergent design incorporated with that, which is you look at how effective what you’re doing and the data you’re collecting, how effective it is and what changes you need to make rather than sticking to a really strict plan and seeing it through, even if it’s not working appropriately. So, you do a lot of back and forth checking the data, checking your analysis, and part of what you do is use a constant comparison method. So, you’re always comparing person-to-person codes to codes and making sure that what you’re doing is really close to what the participants are saying, rather than coming with an idea already of what’s happening and it really should…uh…so you look as you go and decide when do you actually have this saturation point, which is a theoretical saturation which is making sure that you’ve explored each and every aspect of the theory that you’re starting to develop and so it’s a really intense way of collecting data. Often it involves a lot of people and it’s…it’s more on-the-fly. That’s actually a bad way to describe it. It’s…it evolves as you go and so you really have to stay close to your data and close to your participants and that makes it more challenging and messy, but it also means that you can be more certain that you’re better representing people. It also, now I did…I use constructivist grounded theory. So, thinking about people socially and how meanings are socially constructed, but it also really involves the research and that you can’t divorce yourself from that.

**KL:** So, I would love to hear a little bit more about why you chose this particular method for your thesis work because I think people could be listening to this and thinking like, well how do you know when you would need grounded theory. I mean, is it just like nothing else would work so you do grounded theory instead? I mean, like, is it…is it kind of a catch-all? And it sounds like it’s very precise in terms of how you’re describing it. So, how did you come to choose this particular method?

**RW:** Well, one of the real benefits of this method is that things that are left unexplored or things that might be messy you can really dig into. So, you’re…you’re really…particularly in areas that haven’t had enough theorizing, that’s really, I think, one of the strengths of grounded theory, that you can come to it and just say, “alright participants, tell me what I need to know as a researcher.” So, one of the things that I definitely have found—this is partly in information science, but I think I could say this maybe more generally is often people who are undergoing a transition. So, they’re undergoing constant change in their day-to-day lives. People haven’t looked at them enough as people undergoing a transition. Often, people who are undergoing a transition are participants in research, but that doesn’t mean that the transition that they’re experiencing is under study. So, I followed people over months and wanted to kind of get people at different points and trying to really understand what’s it like at this particular moment in time, what’s it like at that particular point in time now that they’ve moved on, and so it can be a you’re not quite sure what else to come with, but it also is it’s a really rich way of understanding people’s experience as…as they’re going through it and I find it a really satisfying way to talk to people that you are really wanting to hear what they have to say, so.

**KL:** So, I think as you’re describing grounded theory, it sounds like in some ways it’s kind of boundless and that you can kind of go in lots of different directions. You can collect lots of different kinds of data, you don’t quite know what’s going to come your way but at the same time you’ve also described it as having a sense of boundaries and that there are particular rules, or best practices and how to do this. So, I’m wondering if you can dive in a little bit more to what do you consider to be kind of the boundaries around grounded theory that really helped define this as a methodology.

**RW:** I think the boundaries come with how the data is collected and analyzed together. It is very flexible and open, you really can use lots of different practices, it really focuses on, at least constructivist grounded theory because there are different kinds of grounded theories out there but constructivist grounded theory really focuses on participant voice and looking for patterns and constructing a theory on how people come together on how people come together to socially decide on things. So, there’s a lot of options within it, there are, the boundaries are quire porous, there are lots of different options in…in what you can do. It has a lot to do with the process and I think that’s really where it comes out that you can collect data in a lot of different ways from different people but it has to do with this collecting data and analyzing it together. Um, making, there’s other things that…so, Kathy Charmaz is one of the main authors in terms of constructivist grounded theory because there are different kinds of grounded theory. That, part of what you do is you write memos as you do your analysis. So, you’re writing as process, not your final writing but that you’re writing and as a way to analyze what you’re seeing as you go. Then, you’re using theoretical sampling so that you’re ensuring that you have a wide range of the experiences that you’re…that are under study that you’re seeing the different aspects of them and making sure they’re included and then you have your theoretical saturation which is you’ve now fully understood the actual thing under study. So, those are sort of the general things about constructivist grounded theory but there’s…there’s a lot that has been about things like, how do you code? So, typically you start with very, very close line by line coding of transcripts or other kinds of data and then you sort of build, you know, you start looking at longer pieces of writing and you sort of build your codes and you have themes and sub-themes that build from there which then are part of the grounded theory themselves. So, it’s more yeah, it’s a methodology and how you go about it rather than what particularly you do.

**KL:** So, this seems to me like one of those love-hate methodologies where some people are hearing this and they’re like, super excited and they want to dive in and this is like, the perfect method for them and other people are hearing this and they’re like, this freaks me out, I’m scared, I don’t want to go this direction. So, I’m curious because obviously you’ve embraced this methodology in your own work, what are some of the challenges that you found with this? I mean, it seems slippery in a lot of ways because you’re kind of constantly dealing with change and looking for you know, new things within the exploration. What are some kind of challenges you’ve seen with this method?

**RW:** And it is so true that there’s a…it’s a love-hate thing and my psychology degree was quantitative and my research that I did in my masters was mixed methods and then my Ph.D. was full qualitative where I used this method and it took a bit to come to this understanding that having these tensions and this discomfort is actually a good thing and so, the challenge really is to be open to what’s happening and it doesn’t mean that you aren’t rigorous and it doesn’t mean that you don’t have plans and ideas and it also doesn’t mean that you don’t do reading ahead of time. There is a sort of a variant of grounded theory that says you shouldn’t do any reading ahead of time, you just come to it cold. That is a very extreme view and most people it’s about, alright, I have done a bunch of reading, they call it being like, sensitizing concepts that you have these things that you think might be a part of things but then you are going to let your participants lead things and so it…it definitely is a method where you have to be okay with giving up some of your control and understanding that yes, I have to do this more going with the flow and the reason you that is because you are trying to include your participants and you’re trying to ensure that you’re listening to what they have to say. I had a very uncomfortable experience in my doctoral studies where I had wanted to collect information from my participants. I interviewed them about approximately six months apart. So, two in-depth interviews and in between I wanted to catch what’s happening right now. I wanted to…I called them check-ins and I wanted to do them on blogs because I thought, oh, that’s easy, I’ll post the question, they can post the answer, this is great. Most of my participants hated it. They hated it and so it…it was ok well I still want to know what’s happening at particular points in time with them. So, what do I do now? Now, this is part of what I’m describing is emergent theory, emergent design as well but it’s…it’s this being responsive and ok, I’m just going to have to change what I do and give up some of the control. So, I ended up giving participants a choice about what they did rather than trying to make what wasn’t working work and you, that’s part of what you have to do sort of throughout out is you are making decisions about okay, have I talked to enough people, have I got enough different perspectives, how does this work and it is a very self-reflective kind of process, which definitely has its discomfort. It makes you though as a research really questions what you know, how you know it, your position of power as the research and so the…the difficult things about it are also the benefits as well.

**KL:** Right, well, you’ve completely drawn me in. I’m going to be looking more into this myself. We’re going take another brief break, when we come back we’re going to talk a little bit more with Rebecca about her most recent research on academics on short-term contracts, back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Rebecca, I know that some of your more recent work has been focused on academics on short-term contracts, can you tell us a little bit more about what you’re focusing on there?

**RW:** So, this really came about because of a Ph.D. study which was looking at academics who were early career starting into full-time, continuing positions and what was really interesting in talking to them about their information behavior, how they found information, what they were looking for, all the rest of it was that they kept on saying things like, well you know things are a bit challenging now but it’s so much better than when I was on short-term contracts and so I started really looking more into that reading more about the neoliberal university, the way that academia is changing, all of the discussing around adjuncts etc., etc., and that’s when I realized this is where I wanted to go with my next research project and one of the things when you look at people’s transitions is that they’re going from the…the research in transitions theory talks about basically two points of stability with instability in between and this point of instability is sort of this liminal space where you’re not quite what you previously were, you’re not quite the new thing, you’re…you’re figuring it out and often it’s redefining your sense of self. You’re going through all these different experiences, particularly in finding your new place and situation. So, when you think of people go…undergoing this transition its stability to stability but when you look at people who are on short-term contracts its instability to instability and it’s all of this constant changing and so the things that we focus on which are, so, you have this constant instability and it’s not just academia obviously. There’s casualization is happening in all kinds of different fields. So, it, I’m looking at academics mainly because that’s sort of where my research came from but I think it’s something that’s really important that we start to look at what happens with people who are in these positions and in academia there has been so much discussion and so many fabulous things written about casualization but I have noticed that, probably with the exception of Australia, not a lot of people have done the talking to academics. It’s starting to happen but there hasn’t been as much discussion with the people who are actually undergoing it rather than about academia as a field.

**KL:** So, I think this raises kind of an interesting question and I’m wondering if you’re looking at this at all, which is some people who go through transitions choose those transitions like they decide to go into a new field, they decide to change jobs, they decide to move cities, but it seems like part of this going from instability and stability is it’s not necessarily your decision you know, like, your contract is not renewed, for example, and you have to go to another institution, is that you know, are you finding anything there in terms of just like, people’s kind of agency around the transitions and what choices they’re able to make within those situations.

**RW:** And agency is one of the big things I think that…that comes out and there are people who sort of just see this as this is just the way things are and I’m just gonna plow through it and I’m just do what I can. There are people who, I mean there has been stuff written on this as well, it’s quite an interesting thing to look at. There are the people who decide, you know, I’m going to fight back in whatever ways I can, which often are…tend to be quite limited depending on their situation but for a lot of people if this feeling that they don’t have agency within it that these things are quite overwhelming but what they’re concentrating more on is just the day-to-day survival kinds of things because it’s you know, you have a year or nine months on a contract and six months in you’re already looking for the next thing. So, there are some really interesting issues of agency but often those sort of gen subsumed by the I…I need to find the next thing which really pushes everything out and drives what people do.

**KL:** Right, so I’m curious, it sounds like you’re talking with people who could be under high amounts of stress as they’re going from instability to instability, how is that impacting maybe how you’re collecting data or how you’re even just engaging with these…these research participants when you know they’re under potentially high levels of stress.

**RW:** So, at the moment I’m doing focus groups as part of a pilot study. Um, so I’ve done four focus groups and it is something that you really do have to be very sensitive about and it’s particularly challenging because I actually do have a full-time continuing job and I never was on short term contract. So, part of me feels that I don’t have the right to speak to people but then I also think about alright well, what can I do with this privilege that I have? So, it’s being very upfront with people about what you’re doing and why you’re doing it; that I’m also taking the data that I’m collecting and I’m feeding it back…well, it will be. Hopefully this summer I’ll have the analysis on the pilot finished and you feed it back to the institutions in very, very general terms but identifying here are the problems that are coming about. But one of the things I’ve been finding that people really want a chance to talk about it. I mean, everyone tends to like to be able to have someone interested in what they have to say but in this particular field, a lot of people have in academia, I mean a lot of people feel like they’re not heard, that they don’t get a chance to talk about what happens with them and because they’re still not considered typical even if you know 50% of people are working on these short term contracts the university they’re built around long-term contracts but continuing positions all of the rest of it. So, people actually tend to want the opportunity. So, I had set…in my pilot study I had set sort of a limit of how long a contract I was looking for but I had people who said “I can still consider myself to be on the short-term contract even though I don’t quite fit your criteria, can I speak and you?”, and you realize a lot of people just want that opportunity to talk about what’s difficult, about what they do.

**KL:** So, you had mentioned earlier kind of feeding information back maybe in an aggregate way to institutions that might find this information useful. What are you hoping will come out of this research? What are maybe some practical applications that you think could come out of the work that you’re doing?

**RW:** So, yeah, I think that this is one of the important parts of it. So, I’m, at the moment I’m writing up a grant because I would like to do a really big, much more…so I’m obviously in the UK, I want to look UK wide. I think the more people studying this, the more people talking to people in this situation the better but I do think that there are certain things that we can do that would really be of benefit and I think sort of a best practices around what can you do to help people? Now, part of this is because you really want the people who are experiencing these things to have the benefit of, you know, the easiest transition, the best support, and all the rest. A part of it also you need to sell it to other people is these are people who have huge amounts of knowledge and experience. They do wonderful work in whichever teaching or research positions that they’re a part of but they often end up having to leave early because they found a new contract. Papers aren’t written, you know, the teaching never changes, it never gets modified, they do all of this work and it goes with them. So, there’s both, on both sides it’s really important that universities an departments are able to benefit from their experience but that also then they are able to experience a better transition and I’m always really interested in orientation. You know, what kinds of help do people get when they first start? What kinds of orientation sessions are they given and this is one of the things that often is really lacking. That people come in…departments are not ready for them, the practical day-to-day stuff that they need is not the stuff that they’re given. It often happens that they’re given policies and procedures that are important but very, very high level and what they really need is, what’s my computer password? Where’s my office? You know, the very, the very practical kinds of things and that’s what I hope could come out. That if you could say to people “here are the things that will make things easier, here are the ways that we know that we can get people up and running more quickly in their job”. How we can use the terms off to knowledge management. So, looking at planning for transition between people and passing off knowledge and making sure that the things that they know are kept but also what I would love to see is a way to help people to kind of really demonstrate the knowledge that they have. It’s sometimes hard on a CV to really show what you do. You know, you say “Oh I did, you know, two terms of teaching wherever…” but you know, how you can sort of better your CV. So, I would love to see some practical outcomes around the support that they get, that academics and researchers on short-term contracts get, but also then how they can best use the information that they have gained and the knowledge that they’ve learned in the positions that they’re in.

**KL:** Rebecca, this sounds incredibly practical and useful. I want to thank you so much for coming on the show, sharing about your work about information behavior and also your experience with grounded theory and this most recent study, thanks so much.

**RW:** Thank you.

**KL:** 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.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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