Episode 123: Jessie Moore

# KL: Katie Linder

# JM: Jessie Moore

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

# [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. Jessie L. Moore, director of the Center for Engaged Learning and professor of professional writing and rhetoric at Elon University. Jessie previously coordinated Elon’s first year writing and professional writing in rhetoric programs. She received her PhD and Master’s degree in English Rhetoric and Composition from Purdue University. Jessie leads planning, implementation, and assessment of center’s research seminars which support multi institutional inquiry on high impact pedagogies and other focused engaged learning topics. Her recent research examines transfer of writing knowledge and practices, multi institutional research and collaborative inquiry, writing residency’s for faculty writers, the writing lives of university students, and high impact pedagogies. She is the co-author of *Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer* and Understanding *Writing Transfer: Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education.* Jesse currently serves as the elected secretary of the conference on college composition and communication and is US regional vice president of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

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

**JM:** It’s a pleasure to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

**KL:** So, I’m really excited to talk with you about researching writing transfer. This is something I’m not sure I know a ton about and I think could be new for some of our listeners as well. So first, what is writing transfer?

**JM:** Briefly, writing transfer refers to a writer’s ability to repurpose or transfer prior knowledge about writing to a new audience, purpose, and context and that definition and the work about writing transfer tends to build on broader studies and educational psychology and related fields of transfer of learning and so there are some ideas that are embedded in that definition that also come from those other areas, a couple worth mentioning briefly. Some writing transfer is automatic. It’s something that we’ve practiced so much that it’s really second nature so we may not even realize that we are actively adapting things we’ve learned in a prior context for a new writing situation, but much of our writing transfer actually requires much more mindful abstraction so we have to think more actively about how we’re repurposing or remixing knowledge and skills that we’ve learned in a prior setting and now trying to use with a different audience for a different purpose and there are an array of alternate terms that also come up when we’re talking about writing transfer, so you may hear people talk about consequential, consequential transitions or generalization so we use writing transfer as the umbrella term recognizing that when we start getting into the depths of the research, some of those other terms actually help us be a bit more descriptive about what we’re talking about.

**KL:** So, I can imagine this would be a lot of interest to researchers who listen to this as well as they’re trying to maybe transfer the skills they picked up writing journal articles into doing things like grant writing. You know, all these different kind of subgenres of academic writing life.

**JM:** Absolutely. A lot of the research focuses on students and particularly students who are transferring knowledge from a first-year writing course to writing in their major or writing in a general education program, but we know that the concepts apply to professionals as well and what’s I think challenging is trying to research that, that subset of participants or writers is that often by the time we’re in a professional context and writing regularly, there’s already a lot of transfer that has become more second nature to us so we don’t necessarily remember that we are transferring prior knowledge somewhere before.

**KL:** Right. Okay, so what are some other kinds of questions that you’re asking about writing transfer as you’re delving into this research?

**JM:** So, I should preface by saying that a lot of my work with writing transfer grows out of a research seminar at the Center for Engaged Learning at the Elon University hosted 2011 to 2013 and the work has continued from there. We had ten teams with a total of forty-five researchers from twenty-eight institutions and five countries. So when I’m talking about the kinds of questions we were asking, we were all working under a big question of “can you teach for writing transfer?” but we had a lot of sub questions under that—and I’m happy to go into those sub questions in just a moment—but that big question, can you teach for writing transfer, really it reflects and assumption in our curricular structures and at least the United States’ higher education have that we assume if we require students to take a first-year writing course that they will be able to use what they learned when they’re writing in their majors and writing for course across the university. And prior to the research seminar, there wasn’t actually a lot of research testing that idea. So, that was the big question. Some of the sub questions that individual teams looked at or groups of teams looked at, what is writing transfer look like or how do you know what’s happening or not happening? How can faculty and academic staff teach for writing transfer from first-year to general education or a first-year to their major? How can we support students writing transfer from the classroom to an internship or to co-curricular activities? How might we facilitate student’s writing transfer among languages and what students, what are student’s perceptions of their writing transfer between their academic writing and their self-sponsored writing, the writing that they’ve done, do because it’s assigned, that they do just because they’re interested in it and then the last big topic that we explored was what are the challenges and affordances to successful writing transfer? So how, if we want to support it, we need to know what challenges writers and other writers might encounter and some of the ways we can better facilitate successful writing transfer.

**KL:** Okay, so these questions big also really definitional. I’m wondering what are some of the kinds of data you collected to start to measure some of these things, especially because some of these questions seem really exploratory.

**JM:** Mhmm. Absolutely, and one of the things we discovered is several of the teams had to take a step back and as what we might call what is questions before they could ask what works or what might be possible and even those what is questions they use a lot of complex sources of data. Early studies relied a lot on survey data, looking at students and faculty perceptions of writing transfer so did students think that they were able to transfer writing knowledge? Did faculty think that students had successfully done so? But subsequent studies have used interviews with students, interviews with faculty, observations of class activities or writing situations, a lot of content analysis of assignment guidelines and cost activities, student writing, interviews with faculty, with other people in the students target writing context, so if they’re writing for a student newspaper, for instance, interviewing her editor to see what their editor’s assumptions are or observations are about the knowledge the students are using and then some things that are a little bit more program level. Most writing programs, really actually all writing programs, do assessment of student learning and so that assessment data comes into play as to inventories of writing taxes just starting by looking at are the different types of writing that we’re asking students to do both in their first-year and across their four or five years in the university.

**KL:** Okay, so since this is kind of beginning stages for looking at writing transfer, what are you starting to learn? What are some of the things that came out of these explorations?

**JM:** So I often focus on five principles that are kind of meta-level findings, and I’m happy to point you towards, your listeners towards some more detailed reports on some of the specifics under these but one of the key findings is that successful writing transfer requires transforming or repurposing prior knowledge. We can’t just copy and paste what we’ve done in one setting to another setting, and that may be intuitive or obvious, but I think sometimes when we are designing curricula in our particularly upper level university course, we don’t always keep in mind that that’s not an automatic process and students have to take some time to think about how their prior knowledge and if their prior knowledge comes into play, so that’s one principle. A couple other things that we learned, writing transfer is complex and we need to acknowledge that complexity to really help students successfully transfer their writing knowledge and skills. The student’s dispositions and identities come into play. We have to recognize that students are whole people so it’s not, they’re not writers in isolation, they have other part of their identity. Because it’s such a complex process, we need to use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods as heard in that list of ways we try to get data on writing transfer and we need to look both to what we call the critical transition points when students are actually trying to transfer prior knowledge from one setting to another, but also a mantra to denote patterns of learning to see how they’re developing as writers over time and how they’re learning strategies that work more effectively or not and then the last thing, and I’m happy to go into more detail on this one, is that university programs can teach for transfer and that was the big question we were hoping to find. We put so much energy into first-year writing programs. It was really reassuring to see that our results suggest that it is possible to teach for transfer if you are strategic about the way you design you curriculums and the experiences the students have.

**KL:** Well, I definitely want to link to some additional resources in the show notes for people who are interested in following up so we will make sure to have some of that available to listeners. We’re gonna take a brief break. When we come back, we’re gonna hear a little bit more from Jessie about her work with multi institutional research. Back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Jessie, one of the things that really interests me about your work is that you do a lot multi-institutional research and I’d love to hear a little bit about how you became involved in some of you multi institutional research projects.

**JM:** Absolutely. I would say that there were a couple entry points for me. One was the research that we talked about in the first segment. In about 2010, I started having conversations with ten peoples and Peter Felton here at Elon University, and then adding Randy Bass from Georgetown University, and Chris Anson from North Carolina State University, to think about what we could learn if we were including people from more institutions. So, we asked some big picture thinkers who are also prolific scholars to jump into a practice that was fairly uncommon in writing studies at the time and I think remains rare in scholarship of teaching and learning, but that experience of a multi-institutional research on writing research has been so generative that it in many ways became a proof of concept for our involvement of multi institutional research. At the same time though, I was working with a couple folks from Michigan State University: Jeff Grabill, Stacey Pigg, Bill Hart Davidson, and they had invited colleagues from seven different institutions from two-year colleges to research universities to participate in a mapping project of the writing lives of first-year college students and so that also is an ongoing research project. The first survey, I want to say it was in maybe 2013, I have to double check, but we’re about to launch a new version of that study because we just found it very helpful to test this, our concepts and our understanding of the writing that our students are doing, not just at one institution but at multiple institutions. And then the last impetus for me with this work is because that writing transfer research seminar was so generative, we now at the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University launch a new seminar each year focused on engaged experiential education. We recognize that our university was well respected for practicing engaged learning and we often got questions about what we were doing that was supporting students but we recognize that our practices might not transfer, here’s that term again, but it may not be applicable to other institution types and so doing multi-institutional research on the engaged learning and experiential practices that we do here at Elon allows us to talk more about how those practices might work at other institutions and that’s now as a research, new research seminar every year. We include people from multiple institution types, multiple disciplines, and from institutions around the world and I’m lucky enough to get to plan, implement, assess, and study them so it’s always a new question that I get to dive into through this multi institutional research.

**KL:** Okay, so this sounds amazing and you’ve already outlined some of the kind of core benefits of doing this work and having kind of these multiple perspectives, answering questions that maybe you couldn’t tackle by yourself, but as I’m listening to this I’m also thinking the logistics of this might also be a little bit challenging or there may be some other challenges of doing some of this multi-institutional research. Can you talk a little bit about that? What are maybe some of the obstacles you’ve had to overcome or just things that have been a little bit tricky as you engage in these multi institutional projects.

**JM:** Yes, so any time when you get more institutions involved, I think their complexity increases and that can come through in terms of trying to balance institutional and multi-institutional goals for a project. Each collaborator may have their own hope for what they accomplish with the project and they may have institutional goals that they’re trying to align with the project and sometimes those goals conflict and so you have to be willing to do a lot of negotiation of how to move both the institutional and the multi-institutional goals forward. We’ve also seen, we actually study the multi-institutional research strategies, and one of the challenges that comes up repeatedly is project scheduling and we have a tendency when we do multi institutional research to map out everything we want to do on a very often tight timeline, though we may not recognize that it’s tight, and then life happens at one or more of our research sites and we have to be able to adapt and adjust and be really willing to revise the timeline to see success because otherwise then the project will just wander. One other challenge that I think shouldn’t necessarily be a challenge but often is, is Institutional Review Board applications. Many of our IRBs are used to looking at projects that are within the bounds of their institution or they’re used to looking at multi-institutional projects that are from a specific type of discipline and so when you start getting into particularly scholarship of teaching and learning projects that cross multiple disciplines, you start pushing some of the institutional assumptions about research and that can take some time to navigate.

**KL:** Okay, so that’s really interesting. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit, Jessie, about the structures of maybe project leadership that you’re engaging with in these multi institutional research projects. Is there kind of point people at each institution? Is there one person who’s kind of taking the lead of organizing meetings, communication, moving the projects forward? How does that work?

**JM:** That’s a great question. We talk about it as a hub-and-spoke model where there’s some central person or entity, in our case it’s the Center for Engaged Learning that’s the main organizer, facilitator of the collaboration, but then at each spoke, at each institution, there’s a point person there as well. So, an institution might have five or sixteen members but there’s one person or two people who are connecting that institutional spoke back to the larger hub. One of the reasons that, that model seems to work well is that it keeps them structured but also it’s flexible. So at individual institutions if leaders need to swap out roles, so if someone else takes the lead on the project of the institution for a while, there that’s a possibility but there’s still a structure for them to connect back to the other institutions and that that hub really needs to be facilitative, not authoritative. So, it’s not someone saying, “here’s my research question and all these other institutions are going to answer it.” It’s someone saying, “I have this idea, could we brainstorm research questions around it and ten research methods so we could try at multiple sites?” The other element is in the research seminars. We bring folks together for a week in each of three summers and so that provides some face-to-face time to work through challenges to negotiate the institutional versus multi-institutional priorities and also just to develop some sense of community. I don’t think that that face-to-face contact in the way that we’ve implemented in the research seminars is essential, but there does need to be some element recognizing the human nature of these collaborations, seeing our co-operators as real people who have real lives beyond the research project so that you’re willing to be more flexible when challenges come up and you need to renegotiate who’s contributing in what ways and so the hub, whoever is working that hub, can take the lead on looking to see okay maybe it’s a conference that everyone’s attending and you can get together there or maybe Skype calls every month are a way for people to literally see each other and see who they’re working with, but having those moments to connect, whether online or in person, and making sure that there’s a schedule for those, that’s really a key role that whoever’s working at the hub can take to keep the project moving forward.

**KL:** So, I’m curious Jessie what recommendations you might have for researchers who are listening to this and thinking I really want to be involved in more institutional research, more multi-institutional research? This is an area where they really want to take their work, how would they kind of get started? What are some things that you would recommend kind of just based on your experience to kind of watch out for, what recommendations do you have for them?

**JM:** Sure, I think one of the is, and I’m gonna start with the people involved, and in one of the teams, we have a phrase that I won’t say on the podcast, but we talk about making sure the team members are nice people essentially, that they are people that you want to work with for the long haul. So you have to pick your team carefully and that means that it might be thinking about your existing network, who is it that you are interacting with at conferences, who’s doing research that’s similar to yours, and who you genuinely enjoy talking with about that research? It might also be possible to send a note to a to a listserv saying, “I’m interested in this research, who else might be interested in collaborating on a project like this?” but then you have to be very careful about you’re facilitating that nice person role as well because there is a balance of people really having a commitment to the topic, but also being willing to be part of a team and not necessarily the leader or star, so that that sense of collaboration where everyone is contributing is important. The other thing I would say is that with multi-institutional research, you do need to make a commitment to a long-term collaboration. Because of its complexity, it’s not something that you’re going to necessarily see results within a year as you might with other research that you’re doing. It’s messy, it’s often has unexpected challenges or delays and so you have to be willing to stick with it a little longer. It’s great to have a timeline and have everyone commit to check-in points along the way but then also recognizing that you need the flexibility to make adjustments as a project is advancing.

**KL:** This are such good recommendations, Jessie. Thank you so much. We’re gonna take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more about the research seminars that Jessie’s organizing back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Jessie, one of the things you mentioned in segment two, which I’m really intrigued by is this idea of research seminars that you’re organizing and that could mean a lot of different things, so can you tell us a little bit about kind of the structure of those research seminars? What do they look like?

**JM**: So each year, the Center for Engaged Learning launches a new multi-year, multi-institutional research seminar on a focused engaged learning topic. We typically invite two of our colleagues here at Elon and one or two experts from elsewhere in the world to collaborate on leading the research seminar. Those folks help frame a call for applications, which provides a bit of an umbrella or overarching research question that we are hoping our eventual participants will connect with. We then open a call for applications and typically accept twenty-four to thirty-six participants representing higher education institutions from around the world. They are not all from one discipline. We try to make sure that the groups that we accept or the people that we accept actually represent a wide variety of institution types, geographic locations, and disciplines so that we can support work that eventually will be generalizable to more student types and institution types. Those participants come to Elon for one week each of three summers. In the first summer, they are forming smaller within the broad research seminar group so we typically will have four to six research teams for each research seminar and those smaller teams then bring some sub research questions related to the overarching topic of the research seminar. They commit to shared research methods to explore those questions and make a plan for their first year of data collection. In the second summer, they come back to ELON for a week and they do some data analysis for whatever they’ve collected in year one. Often, that’s the point where they may need to pause and say, so this initial finding came up and we really need to figure that out before we can go back to our original question. Maybe figure out what is before they figure out what’s possible and to use the parlance of Pat Hutchings taxonomy of scholarship of teaching and learning research questions. But, they then by the end of that week, they have a plan for their year two of data collection. It might be a continuation of their year one. It might be an adjustment based on what they learned. They go back to their home institutions, typically have check-ins with the seminar leaders every couple months to help them stay on track with the calendar that they’ve set for their group and then they come back for the third summer and that summer we pack a lot into just one week on campus. We often start the week with a conference that’s open to others beyond the research seminar so that our participants can share their work but other researchers who have been working on the topic can also come and present. Then, the participants are working on additional data analysis and ideally starting to work on publications from their work as well. So, they’ve been working in between those week-long meetings but the weeks together really give them some focused time to collaborate with each other and then even through the center support of their research ends at that point we’ve seen many of the teams continue their partnerships in some form over several years beyond the research seminar.

**KL:** Ok, so I have so many questions, Jesse. The first one is kind of a logistical question of if these are multi-year projects, and you have multiple of these running at one time, are they meeting at different weeks during the summer? Are you having everybody converge on your campus all in one week? You know, like how is that functioning in terms of managing multiple of these research seminars each year?

**JM**: So, I’m the only person that connects with all other groups that are meeting in any given summer cycle and so we intentionally schedule them in different weeks so that they can have focus within their topic, not have disruptions. In one hand, it would be really fun to think about what might happen if the group’s intersected but it’s also a logistical limitation that we need space for each of the individual teams to meet and we also have to house them on campus. So, we…we can only bring one group at a time. They tend to usually have a week in between. Sometimes they’re back-to-back but we schedule all of them within about a five week window and we’ve got housing available on campus to watch them and while they’re here.

**KL:** Ok, so then that leads to my next question which is: what is the funding structure for a program like this? I mean is this something where people who are participating are using some of their own institutional funds to come and kind of work with this group? I would imagine some of them are international so that might add another layer of kind of logistics and funding as well. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**JM:** Sure, Elon actually has made a commitment to funding most of the expense related to the seminar. So, Elon covers reimbursements for travel for our domestic participants and our international participants. We can’t always cover the full amount but we do cover up to a certain amount for each of their summer sessions. We provide lodging and meals while they’re here and we also provide a stipend for seminar leaders and anyone else that we bring in for short term support during the weeks on campus. The participants, if they are using research tools that have a subscription cost, they are responsible for that cost. Similarly, if they want to offer gift cards or other incentives to their research process they’re responsible for those costs but we’ve tried to build a structure where we can cover as many of the costs as possible so that that’s not a barrier to participation.

**KL:** Okay, this sounds like an incredible program and I know you have a new research seminar that’s going to be coming up; can you talk a little bit about that and also the kind of the timeline that people can expect to see announcements about it?

**JM:** Absolutely, so, we are actually going to go back to the writing transfer focus for our 2019-2021 research seminar, but we’re going to take a slightly different angle on it. We are focusing on writing beyond the university, whereas the previous research seminar focused a lot on writing transfer that happens within the university. In this next research seminar we want to look at writing transfer to internship and research sites, to service learning sites, to workplace and civic context. So, basically all of the spaces that our students are encountering that are outside the classroom, outside the formalized co-curricular spaces of the university, and also along a timeline that it may be co-transfer, co-contextual where there are things that are happening at the same time that they’re students but also to the things that they’re doing to the writing that they’re doing after they graduate. So, like our other research seminars this one will be multidisciplinary. It’s not limited to writing study scholars and in our last writing transfer to research seminar we had geologists, we had historians. So, we had a range of disciplines represented and we want to achieve that again and we’re hoping that it will be similarly generative. The last research seminar on writing transfer has led to dozens of publications and hundreds of presentations and also I think importantly facilitated an entry into the scholarship of teaching and learning for a lot of our participants. So, we think it’s the right time to jump back to that topic with a slightly different angle. We are hosting a planning forum on our campus this July and we will have a call for applications published in August on the Center for Engaged Learning website and we hope that folks will consider that as a part of their professional trajectory. Applications will be due probably in early November. Although, we’re still working on setting that date and then the research meetings will be in July in 2019, 2020, and 2021.

**KL:** Ok, so we will make sure to link to this in the show notes whenever information is available so that people can make sure that they can learn about it and potentially apply to be part of the research seminar. Jesse this has been fascinating, thank you so much for coming on the show, sharing about your work with writing transfer multi-institutional research and all about these wonderful research seminars that you’re running as well. Thanks for your time today!

**JM:** Thank you, I enjoyed the conversation.

**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

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