Episode 124: Sarah Rose Cavanagh

# KL: Katie Linder

# SRC: Sarah Rose Cavanagh

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

# [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. Sarah Rose Cavanagh, an Associate Professor of Psychology and Associate Director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College and author of *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion*.

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

**SRC:** Oh thank you for having me!

**KL:** So I’ve been following your work on emotions and teaching for a little while now, and actually got to see you present on it I think a couple of years back and was really intrigued. I’m wondering if you could talk about the importance of focusing on emotion in teaching and course design. What are some of the key reasons why this is important?

**SRC:** Yep.Well I think I came at the writing of this book as a psychologist so I was recently new to pedagogy in faculty development, and I research emotions so I see them everywhere. We have this saying in psychology that ‘Research is Mesearch’, and I saw emotions in my own teaching and when I started thinking about the building blocks to good teaching and good learning, I feel like I saw emotions throughout learning. And so to learn something new you need to pay attention, you need to use your working memory storage, you need to be motivated to do those things, and you need to remember and retrieve. And emotions we evolved to prioritize all of those things. And so emotions arrest attention, they motivate action, they tag information that’s important to remember. And so I feel like that is really important, and so I started digging into the research and I found a rich literature already growing on the topic. Uh Reinhard Pekrun in Germany, and Mary Helen Immordino-Yang as a neuroscientist – or researchers who have really – they had already been putting together a lot of empirical work showing just that. That emotions are critical for learning.

**KL:** Okay so I want to dig into this a little more and think about some examples of emotions in teaching, because I think some people might be listening and thinking “Okay. Happiness? Sadness?” you know, in a very kind of basic way we know that this is kind of what emotions are. But I get the sense that there’s quite a bit more here and you can go quite a bit deeper. So what are some examples where you might see emotion in teaching and learning environments?

**SRC:** Uh huh. Well I think even if you don’t care about emotion at all or think about it in your teaching, there’s already tons of emotions in the classroom. Uh so students are both what Reinhard Pekrun calls positive activating emotions – things like interest, curiosity, excitement. And then also negative activating emotions – anxiety, frustration and boredom. And students in our classes are feeling all of these things and it’s going to impact their learning both in positive and negative ways. Sometimes when I talk to people about – start talking to people about the ideas in my book, they assume I’m saying that emotions are all good. That they’re all going to benefit learning. And of course there’s a lot of negative emotions that are going to detract from learning, especially if they are distracting the students. Uh and so they’re already there, and if you’re aware of them, then you can intentionally plan your activities, your assignments, your syllabus, how you respond to students, how you think about your own presence in the classroom in order to kind of maximize the relevant ones that will enhance learning and minimize the ones that are going to detract from learning.

**KL:** So I can imagine this was a really timely topic particularly following some of recent political events in the recent past, where a lot of campuses were very highly charged and students were struggling I think – and faculty as well – with distractions around like the most recent presidential election for example. And a lot of people said, “You know, this is a challenging time to be in the classroom because there is so much distraction. There is so much emotion.” I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about the impact of larger kind of community emotions. On the classroom, because it’s not always just the individual emotion of the student, but I would imagine certain things like national events, or national disasters, or whatever it may be could create a kind of community emotion that is impacting those environments as well.

**SRC:** Right. Sure. And I think that that you remember things, because sometimes just acknowledging that there is that emotional climate – especially, you know, I’ve talked to a lot of people and done workshops and things where I often get this question, or people are sharing their own experience of teaching the day after the election in the states. And a lot of just normalizing and calling it out – and I think doing that also enhances the sense of community. That we’re all kind of feeling this together, and that’s going to be distracting, but let’s put that to the side for the moment. Or depending on the topic, some courses – you know, in political science for instance, or sociology, those topics are going to be highly relevant and you can use them to really dig into the material together. But then other classes, if it’s a math class for example, you know, acknowledging it and then putting it aside in order to focus on the work of the classroom can be a powerful tool.

**KL:** So I’m wondering if you have advice for people, and I am one of these people that will out myself, that have relatively low amounts of emotional intelligence, which is basically being able to read emotions in others. And they might be thinking, “Well how do I do this? How do I kind of pay attention to emotion in the classroom if it’s not a strength of mine?” Are there certain things that people can be looking for in these environments that would help them to identify emotion in a way that could be effective?

**SRC:** Mhm. Well I think a lot of the techniques – you know, a lot of these are not mine, I found them in the literature, I found them talking to different faculty across the country – a lot of the ideas, you don’t’ have to necessarily be reading someone’s emotions, but rather just thinking through your course design and your assignments. And the principle way to maximize your motivation and get students excited about your material, and I think all of us have stumbled into this intuitively even if we have never read a word of pedagogy, is to make the material relevant and interesting to the students. And you don’t have to be able to read their emotions in order to think through, “How do I make it clear that this activity, or assignment, or topic has relevance either for their personal lives, for their future careers, for some transcendent purpose?” Uh I think we faculty members often think that it’s obvious what the value of what we’re doing is, and how it’s going to translate into one of those purposes, but I think that it isn’t always so clear to the students, and so drawing out those uh, that relevance. An example I like to use is one of my – actually a colleague of mine in chemistry, Brian Niece at Assumption College – he does a lab where they are testing for mercury, and I’m not a chemist so I’m probably phrasing this wrong, but instead of using some sort of pre-boxed lab materials, he has his students go out to the local grocery stores and buy swordfish and then bring it into the lab, and they test their local swordfish for the level of mercury, and then compare it to the FDA levels, and talk through the environmental and health ramifications of mercury in fish and captures it in this relative way where they’re doing the same lab, they’re getting those same skills, but they’re interested. They want to know the results for more than an intellectual reason - for a reason that hits home. And so I think thinking about emotions in that way - the emotional impact of some of your course design can be a way to bring in some of the emotions into the classroom even if you’re not a big emotional person.

**KL:** Alright. So I would love to hear some other sort of possibilities for instructors who are listening to this and thinking, “I want to infuse more emotion into what I’m doing.” Are there some simple things that people can do, and especially as we’re kind of entering into the summer months, people might be thinking about course design here in the U.S. and maybe revising some of their courses or syllabi? What are some things that instructors can do to infuse more emotion?

**SRC:** Yeah. I think, you know, I base a lot on researcher Reinhard Pekrun. He has a control value theory of academic emotions. And so we kind of talk about the value piece. You know, it’s important for students to be motivated and have those positive activating emotions they need to see the value, the relevance to know that it’s not busy work. I think the control piece is also interesting in that, by control he means autonomy, you know, in giving students choices in structuring your syllabus so that they have some say in what they’re going to be studying, you know, a choice of paper topic, or a choice between a paper, a presentation, some part of the course that they get to work on and decide themselves as a class. Those ways of making the students co-architects of the course, and able to chase down their particular interest I think is another way, especially as you’re looking at the whole semester over the summer, to think about those emotional aspects. I think the other one I might suggest - this is more of a summer activity. Uh but one of the take home messages I saw across multiple areas of research that I was investigating was a concept of immediacy cues and having this presence in the classroom. And so immediacy cues include just simple things like eye contact, gestures, varying vocal tones, using inclusive language – like saying, “Today we will do this together” instead of “today I am going to have you do x, y or z.” Really predicted multiple positive outcomes. So it was studies of teacher evaluations, studies of student GPAs, studies of reducing reactants or that a phenomenon where students bind together in a group and decide the course is unfair. Multiple different avenues with different dependent variables all found that strong immediacy cues predicted good outcomes. And so I think what they do is they just tell the students drifting that you’re there with them in the present moment, you’re not sort of off and making your grocery list in your head, and that gets them motivated. So again that can be one of those ways that you can boost their interest.

**SRC:** Well this is really interesting, thanks for giving such practical tips. We’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more about Sarah’s most recent work. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Sarah, for your most recent book, you signed with an agent. And I know about this because I saw you announce it on Twitter. I do follow you on Twitter. And so we will link to your Twitter in the show note incase people are interested in following you. But I was really curious about why you decided to go this route, because academic presses usually do not require agents, and if you’re going for a more trade publication than yes – you would need a literary agent. What helped you to make this decision to go in this direction?

**SRC:** Yep. Well my new book – the topic of the new book - I got inspired for that topic by writing the teaching book. So one of the topics that I talked about in *Spark of Learning* was this idea of emotional contagion, and the fact that the professor’s emotions are impacting and kind of infecting almost the students and vice versa, and that the classroom is this social environment where thoughts, and emotions, and ideas are spreading. And I loved writing that part, and digging into that part in the teaching book, and decided to turn that into its own book. Um the broader question of how we operate more like a hive at times than we do an individual species. And so as I sort of fleshed that idea out, it seems like more of a popular press or trade topic – um kind of a popular psych question and I did some research on the internet and they seem to suggest – that researched seemed to suggest that to publish in a popular trade press that I would need a literary agent. That there are certain publishers that won’t talk to little authors – they will only talk to agents. And so I decided to try to find one!

**KL:** Okay so. Let’s talk about the process. How did you go about choosing agents that you wanted to work with? And what was it like to reach out to them and to start declaring agents?

**SRC:** Well I have – it’s actually kind of a twofold story. I’ll tell the easier one first, that the literary agent that I did sign with, it turns out that I found her through ordinary networking channels than declaring agents, but I did find some also through that channel. So first I had asked – I had talked with the editor at the press where I published my teaching book, and he had a friend at a bigger university press that he connected me with, and he knew that this other friend had multiple contacts in the trade industry, and so I sent him my proposal. He was very kind, and looked at it, and said “Oh my friend, Jessica. This sounds right up her alley.” So I contacted then I sent it to her, and then we started talking and she is who I eventually signed with. I did though – kind of at the same time, I bought a book that I’m going to recommend, it’s called *Get a Literary Agent.* Just simply that (**KL:** Very nice title. Very simple). Yes! Very descriptive. Chuck Sambuchino – it’s this teeny little red book. Very focused. And I followed all of the instructions in it. Um and then I sent out my proposal and a sample chapter to ten different literary agents, and a lot of them never responded. One of them did and asked for more writing, so I sent her more writing. I didn’t eventually sign with her, but I did make that contact. So that process does work apparently sometimes. Uh and how I made the list of whom to contact, I followed my friend Jim Lang’s advice, which was to go to a bunch of books that are like the book that you want to write - you know, the same kind of topic and writing style, and look in their acknowledgement section, because they’ll always thank their literary agent and contact them that way, because you know that literary agent is interested in the type of book you want to write. And so that’s how I did that. I made a list of literary agents to contact from that process, sent the queries out, and then started the conversation.

**KL:** So this is actually the same advice that was offered by an earlier person we talked to Therese Huston, in an earlier episode where she talked about getting an agent as well. So I’ll make sure to link to that in the show notes if people want to hear that perspective also. I’m curious if you could talk a little bit Sarah, about, you know, some people may not understand why you want a literary agent – like what the role is of this person. And you mentioned that for some presses, for many trade presses, you need one. Like they will not look at a manuscript unless it comes from an agent, so that’s kind of an obvious reason. But what are some of the other roles that this person is playing for you as a writer in terms of developing this book, in terms of thinking through how to pitch it to different publishers?

**SRC:** Yep. Well Jessica was really helpful right from the start. You know, she liked my proposal, apparently, because she offered to sign with me, but we then – she then took a deep dive into it and gave me advice about – kind of editor type advice, you know, move this section around, change this. She knew certain things when we would talk on the phone of what the presses would be looking for, you know, and how to shift the language and how I was pitching certain parts of the book – um which to minimize and which to make bigger. And so we went back and forth with the proposal, you know, just in tracked changes in Word a number of times. We took the proposal out to an initial round of publishers, and didn’t get any bites, but got a lot of nice feedback. And so she shared that feedback with me, and then we talked again and based on that feedback, one of the common things we heard from a lot of people was that it was too much like this other book – that I won’t mention – that I had read, and I realized it was because my sample chapter wasn’t really representing where I was going to go with the book well, and so I quickly wrote another chapter – a different one that I think better emphasized the emphasis of my book. And – so then we took that new proposal out to another round, and that’s when we signed with a publisher. Uh she also – she just knows – I feel like every email I get from her – because I’m an academic and I’ve only ever been in academia, I have to google half of the words she uses. You know, she just – she’ll say, “Oh we should do this [*indiscernible*]”. We should sign with this person. We should talk to this person” and she just uses these catch phrases and things. Uh so she has that insider knowledge, you know, about book festivals, and can translate what the editor at the publisher is saying, uh and what that means, and really just that inside track – what’s happening.

**KL:** So I’m wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on the timeline of all of this. So from the point of kind of deciding to start pitching this to agents, to shopping it around to different publishers – because especially you went through multiple rounds of that. What does the timeline look like for this whole process?

**SRC:** Huh let’s see. It’s so hard to remember. I think – well *Spark of Learning* was published in 2016, and I really didn’t get started – I had this book kind of in the back of my mind, and I think the initial ideas that I started formulating were probably in 2015 at some time. Um but then I signed with her, it was snowing – so I think it was probably winter of 2017, and so now here we are a year later. Yeah uh – when I first started, I know that when I was writing the preface I went back and looked at the dates, and I did say that I wrote the proposal before the 2016 election – the initial proposal. And then the topic of the book has shifted a lot since that event, and since all of the surrounding societal changes. So I think it was probably, I was really digging in beginning in 2015, which was three years ago, and it will be published in 2019 – so it’s a process.

**KL:** And what is the status of the book now? Is it done and in press?

**SRC:** Uh it is due in July. So it’s kind of a hectic season for me right now.

**KL:** As we record this, that’s just a few months away for people who are trying to keep track here. I’m wondering Sarah, if you could talk a little bit about, if you know yet, because you’ve mentioned a little bit about working with your agent on promotion, how promotion might look different for a book like this versus a book that’s published with an academic press,

**SRC:** Right. Uh it seems like there are a lot of similarities. So they do want you on Twitter, and talking to – and going to conferences, and doing networking – doing keynotes as they might be available. I think – it seems like from what I can tell so far – it’s early in the stages, but just from conversations that I’ve had that there are such things as book festivals, but that are focused on publishing. You know, there’s more in the way – maybe you have experienced this with your presses, but I didn’t with mine in the way of like book store signings, and signing events – which I haven’t really experienced with the academic book. Um and then I think just getting the word out at different types of venue – you know, industry or business conferences. And I imagine that would vary based on the topic of the book. Mine is psychology, so that has a lot of relevance for human resources conferences and things like that. So I think – I think there’s a lot of similarities and maybe just a little – a few publishing specific, you know, trade publishing specific type of venues.

**KL:** Well thank you for giving us peek behind the scenes – sharing a little bit about the process of working with a literary agent. We’re going to take another brief break, when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more about Sarah’s recent project. Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Sarah, I know in the midst of wrapping up this book, and all of the other things you have going on, you’ve also been working on a study that’s affiliated with a grant and also a conference that you’re planning. So you are quite the busy bee over there – speaking of hives. So I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about this project that you’ve been working on.

**SRC:** Yes sure. So this is a big project – a three year project that was funded by the Davis Educational Foundation, so we’re very grateful to them, and it’s a collaborative project. Jim Lang and I are together at Assumption College, and then we have some collaborators at Tufts University in Columbia and UMass Medical School. And our idea for it has a research study component that we just finished, and then a one day conference or symposium that we’re putting together now at the end. And our idea was sort of to test some of the ideas in my book. So we said earlier – and most of my book is focused on how we maximize kind of activating positive emotions that will get students interested and curious. Uhm the grant study test the other piece – how can we help students to manage their negative emotional states that might be detracting from learning? And so I’m an emotion regulation researcher, and so we kind of looked at the emotion regulation literature and said, “What are the things that seem to help people in daily life, and then we can bring those things into the classroom.” And so we focused on cognitive reappraisal, which is rethinking the meaning or interpretation of an event in order to alter your emotional impact. So say if you get a pink slip, reframing that as, “Oh this is an opportunity to chase down my career dream now that I’m not in this day to day job.” And then the second strategy we focused on was mindfulness. So we developed a small intervention that was delivered to students on iPads. They put on headphones and went through this intervention – this app that just taught them a little bit about if you become bored, or frustrated, or anxious while you’re learning that’s normal. Other students are experiencing this too. Here are some tools from reappraisal or mindfulness that you can use. And they study a lot of ins and outs that I won’t go through, but essentially that’s the meat of it – can we help students regulate emotions in the classroom, and then does it benefit their learning? And so at the end of the class they would pick up the iPads again and take a quiz, and then at the end of the semester they took a final exam that had material from the whole semester. And so we evaluated, does helping them reframe their emotions benefit their learning? And we found that reappraisal did. And so cognitive reappraisal seem to be more effective than our control condition and also mindfulness in helping students’ long term learning. So they scored better on the final exam material from the day where they did some reappraisal.

**KL:** So as we are a research podcast, people love to hear research designs, so I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. I’m sure it was a little complicated because it sounds like you had two different interventions at a minimum, plus a control. Can you talk a little bit about how you set up that in terms of just the research design?

**SRC:** Yes sure. And so we did have those three conditions, we had the reappraisal, mindfulness, and then an informational control which was just a SAT like reading passage with images and texts so students had something that they were reading and looking at so it wasn’t impacting their emotions. Uh it was within subjects, so every student at some point in the semester completed those on different days. And it was randomized, so the app would at the beginning of the semester decide on the order, you know, which day would they do appraisal, mindfulness, or control. We had – we did. We collected data over two different semesters – so fall and spring of 2017, and three different disciplines – so we had art history, math, and economics. So we had kind of a STEM, kind of a humanities, and a social science. And – what else can I tell you? And then the quizzes were multiple choice, the end of the semester was multiple choice, and then we had a bunch of other control days – like days where we came in and just had them rate their emotions, and days when we just had them take a quiz to test in case we did find an effect of the interventions, you know, was it the intervention, or was it these other things like taking a quiz, or just us being in the classroom? And our effects seemed to survive those control analysis.

**KL:** Alright, so you’re also doing a conference around this. Can you talk a little bit about that? What lead to that? Why did you think that was something to kind of dovetail with this other study that you’ve been working on?

**SRC:** Yep. Well we pitched to Davis that the grant was the research plan and then also a dissemination piece. Uh we wanted to let them know that we weren’t just going to let these data sit in a file drawer that we were going to talk to people about them. And so we’re doing that through traditional routes, I’m presenting the data at APS, the psychology conference, next week. And we’re hoping to come to POD and talk to the POD people there about the results. But then we’ll also be presenting the results at this symposium that we’re planning. But we’re still talking as a committee and talking to potential speakers, but we want to bring in some other people who are also looking at different aspects of social, motivational, emotional interventions in the classroom, uh and have it be not just us sharing our results with the world, but also a real day for cross germination of ideas with people who are interested in the topic. So it will be one day, it’s going to be mid-May next year – 2019. So I think it’s the 14th – no. 15th, 16th, or 17th, we’re still working out speakers, and venues, and things like that – but I’ll be in the greater Boston area. And we’re hoping to get a lot of graduate students – get the next generation excited about teaching.

**KL:** Excellent. Well we will link to this in the show notes where more information is available for people who want to follow up. I’m also curious if you could talk about maybe some of the benefits and challenges of a project like this that was cross institutional, because you have several different collaborators coming into this as well.

**SRC:** Yeah it’s really wonderful having different minds on this. I think really – Jim and I at assumption did all of the day to day data collection, training, research assistants and stuff like that. But it was just really great having other people’s expertise. So for instance, our collaborator at UMass Medical School Carl Fulwiler, is a mindfulness researcher and also does mindfulness based cognitive therapy. And so he was really great and instrumental in helping us figure out how we should structure the mindfulness intervention in a way that was true to mindfulness. And Heather Urry at Tufts University, she is my post-doctoral mentor – we continue to collaborate all of these years, and she just has this giant science mind. And so she – she’s big on the open science movement, and so she put our study up on the open science framework, preregistered all of our analysis, you know, did all of that kind of work. I love collaborating for that reason because, you know, I know somethings about mindfulness, and certainly I know a little about research. But um, you know, being able to pull from these people who have greater skills in these areas I think is really wonderful.

**KL:** That’s amazing. So where are you going from here with this project and specifically this study? Are there going to be follow up studies, or are you just going to be wrapping things up with the conference? What are your thoughts?

**SRC:** Yep. Well we want to keep going on. I don’t know – I had sort of a crisis of faith during the study. Just watching the students, you know, they would come into the classroom – you know, of course I’m writing this book, this other book on our social nature, and then I’m watching the students come in to the classroom very socially, you know, talking to each other, joking around with the professor. And then we come in and hand them all headphones and iPads, and put them in these little digital boxes, and everything goes silent, and I just started thinking, “This is not -.” You know, I think the iPads were wonderful for control, you know, everyone did the same thing, saw the same thing, heard the same thing, and I’m glad that we did it that way, but I think wherever we go next - and we’re really just in the brainstorming phase – uh we’ll have greater attention to more social variables and the fact that the classroom is such a social, emotional environment.

**KL:** Well Sarah, thank you so much for coming on the show, sharing about your career and also some of these different pathways you’re taking with your writing. It’s been really fun to talk with you today.

**SRC:** Oh 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.

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