Episode 135: Joshua Eyler

# KL: Katie Linder

# JE: Joshua Eyler

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

# [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. Joshua Eyler, the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence and Adjunct Associate Professor of Humanities at Rice University in Houston, TX. He received his B.A. in English from Gettysburg College in 2000 and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Medieval Studies from the University of Connecticut in 2006. He writes about teaching, learning, literature, and popular culture.

**KL:** Thanks so much for joining me on the show today Josh.

**JE:** Well, thanks for the invitation Katie. I really appreciate it.

**KL:** So I have been watching mostly on social media you work on this new book you have that's coming out and I've been so excited, it’s about how humans learn, and I'm wondering. If you can tell us first just a little bit about this new book and what it's about.

**JE:** Yes. Absolutely. And it's taken a while. It's been a five-year process from start to finish. It's really, what I'm really interested in is can going beneath or under the surface of educational research to try and figure out what it is about the way people learn that makes some teaching techniques effective and other techniques not as effective. And so what that meant was that I was interested in looking at not just how we do what we do but why we do what we do and looking into research in disciplines kind of far afield to try and find the answers to that question of how it is that we learn and why that matters for teaching.

**KL:** Okay, so you mentioned this has been kind of a long-term project for you five years, which actually isn't super long when it comes to the book writing world. But I'm curious, how did you choose this topic? What really drew you to it?

**JE:** Yeah, it was two things actually one related to the last answer and that really is that ever since I moved into working and teaching and Learning Centers, you know a large part of our job is working with faculty, talking to faculty about evidence-based teaching practices, what works, how to do it. But you know ever since I started doing this something was gnawing at me and it was the question why and so we know these things work, but why do they work? And so things like discussion we know discussion works, but we're only starting to, I think, realize why discussion works so well in certain contexts and so early on every time I can sort out the answer to that why question I got answers that were more rooted in the how so if you want to lead a good discussion ask this type of question versus that type of question and that's all really valuable and very important but it still wasn't quite what I was looking for and so to try and answer that question the why question, why do some things work and others not work as well, I decided to kind of dig into areas of research like anthropology, developmental psychology, and cognitive Neuroscience biology, to sort of connect the dots for myself of why it was that I was recommending some teaching strategies over others. So that was one big part of it.

I just wanted to kind of a solid base a solid foundation of knowledge to kind of underpin the teaching strategies that I was reading about and using, and recommending to people. The other reason was that I became a dad six years ago and in watching my daughter Lucy, explore the world for the first time it really made me sit back and think about well, this is so interesting, look how curious she is, look how much she's exploring and wants to know, and so that got me to thinking like what happens to that where does it go?

What is it about how we how we kind of change as we grow up that we can be so curious as toddlers, but really need to kind of reconnect with that curiosity in college and beyond? So it was it was part of it was just being her dad that led me to some of these important questions, you know how much really do people change over time in terms of their learning? And the answers that I found were not actually that much. People learn and have learned in widely similar ways across the lifespan, we mature obviously and you know our brains mature. But the actual mechanisms curiosity, sociology I talk about, authenticity, failure. Those don't necessarily change that much. We just need to utilize them and kind of different ways as teachers in college than we might in kindergarten.

**KL:** Okay, so this is fascinating. I'm so excited to dive into this book. I am curious though because as I'm hearing you talk about this, I'm like, how did you even start this project? Because there are so many different disciplines, so many questions, so many different directions you could go. So where did you start with your research on such a broad topic? Like what was your strategy of kind of attacking this and trying to make sense out of these questions that you're asking?

**JE:** Right. Yes, I guess it was kind of two pronged, first it was okay, Let me let me start with what I know which is the scholarship on teaching and learning and what works and what doesn't and think through what are some what are some commonalities that these have what are we? What is it that we are hypothesizing about learning simply, by looking into which of these strategies work well and so it started in that direction and then I was also reading started to look into some of the research on cognitive psychology, learning strategies and from a psychological perspective and when that led me to find patterns that were emerging and to then figure out which fields I needed to look into to sort of corroborate those patterns.

So it was kind of in two different directions. I was getting a cadre of teaching practices that there's a lot of evidence for and at the same time thinking through the cognitive psychology the psychology of learning and then that led me to. The other disciplines.

**KL:** Okay, so I can imagine I mean, it sounds like the cross-disciplinary lens that you took for this book was really central but I can imagine it can be kind of intimidating to approach all these other disciplines in which you have no training or very little training like this is not really your area. SO I’m wondering if you could talk about that a little bit because I think you know, we probably have listeners to the show who are doing cross-disciplinary research and they're thinking like, where we even start when this is not really your lexicon, your vocabulary, you don't know the theories, you know, you don't have master's degrees or PhDs and all of these different areas. What are some of the challenges of taking on a cross-disciplinary lens for this kind of topic when you know, you're going to have to tackle it from all these different angles?

**JE:** Right, and it was also really important to me, speaking of your last point there, it is really important to me that scholars in these disciplines would find what I was saying credible. So, this is one of the reasons it took so relatively long to write the book because I wanted to make sure that what I was saying had credibility and so I also should say that it was a lot of fun to do this. I mean, I'm a scholar of medieval literature by training and so going into these social science and science disciplines I was able to follow my own curiosity and had a lot of fun with it, but it was hard. I have to have to say that up front and I took a lot of time to teach myself the ways of reading research in those disciplines.

So I taught myself a little bit about a cursory amount of knowledge to enable me to read the method sections and the different pieces of papers in those disciplines. And then I also utilize my very wonderful and very patient colleagues here at Rice who would let me ask them questions and who would be my own teachers in a way and so I drew on that network quite a lot. But it did take time because I really did want to make sure that what I was saying was both grounded in the research that had the most support behind it, but also that people would take seriously as a book. So that was one of the baselines that I started out with, I needed to have this. And then, as I began to delve more into let's say evolutionary biology, I would get to a certain point and then would need to do more and more research just to come up to speed on the terminology, the methods, the kind of disciplinary history that had led to certain statements and so it was it wasn't a linear process at all.

And there was a there was a lot of stopping and starting as I as I kind of filled in just the basic background that I needed in order to. In order to make sense of for myself of some of the findings that I was talking about in these disciplines and to say it with and to say in the kind of way where people would take it serious.

**KL:** Well again Josh, I'm so excited for this book. We will definitely link to it in the show notes for people who want to learn a little bit more about it. We're going to take a brief break when we come back. We'll hear a little bit more from Josh about his work supporting the scholarship of teaching and learning. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Josh one of the things I would love to hear more about from you are some of the ways that you support the scholarship of teaching and learning as the Director of the center for teaching Excellence at your institution. And for listeners who may not be sure what the scholarship of teaching and learning is we can definitely dive into that a little bit but we have done a previous episode on this topic with Peter Felton, which we will link to in the show notes if you want to dive deeper, but why don't we start there Josh? How are you defining scholarship of teaching and learning or “SOTAL” as we call it in the short hand, what does that mean for your Institution?

**JE:** Sure, Well Rush is a research institution. And so one of the ways I see the function of our Center for teaching Excellence is really to be a repository for and a facilitator of research on teaching and learning and so I'd like to frame virtually all the work we do in terms of SOTAL and in terms of a scholarly approach to the study of teaching and the practice of teaching in the classroom.

**KL:** Okay. So what are some of the ways that you're supporting SOTAL in the role that you have with your institution?

**JE:** Well in a couple of different ways, I think the most fundamental way I think is through the umbrella IRB program, which I know we're going to talk about later in the show, but there are other ways too. So we support work on grants like NSF grants and work with faculty on the educational sections of those grants, the broader impact sections. So we work on that. Sometimes we're actually a part of the research team on different SOTAL projects The Faculty are doing. We advise when folks come to us with research ideas. We can advise on strategies for setting up the experiment, things of that nature. We can also direct people to those who are even more expert than us or who are more expert than us at setting up psychological experiments, at looking at sample size, and all the kinds of things that you have to consider to do experimental SOTAL which is I take a really big tent view of SOTAL, and so under that tent, there are many things experimental SOTAL is one of those but it’s not the only thing.

So we kind of support the work, SOTAL our institution all those different sorts of ways, but I also think that a teaching center can play a role in advocating for the importance of SOTAL among other types of research and so I like to think that that we do that as well here at Rice to really use our roles to communicate the importance of that kind of research.

**KL:** So as we talked about in segment one, I know you've been doing this deep dive on how humans learn and I'm wondering how that work on your book project might have impacted how you see so SOTAL or how you work with faculty on these issues? Has it kind of broadened your mindset or impacted you in other ways?

It has and in fact it really sort of cemented for me this the notion of a big tent for SOTAL because the kind of SOTAL that I'm doing in that book is what I would really described as synthetic. It synthesizes a lot of different research, but there isn't any experimental component. It's taking different threads of research from different disciplines weaving them together to try and understand our practice in a new way.

That's also a real emphasis for our Center here at Rice. We use the blog mostly for this, but our approach largely is synthetic. We take questions that we know faculty are curious about or interested in. What's the research on student evaluations for example, or what's the research on Collaborative Learning and we tried to synthesize different perspectives on that question as a way of either reframing the debate or hopefully leading to different kinds of insights through that sort of approach. So there's that type of SOTAL, there's experimental SOTAL, there's, in between those poles, I think there are a lot of big and small ways to approach teaching as a scholarly project regardless of whether you write it down. So that’s part of what we also try to convey. And I really believe that teaching itself is a scholarly endeavor. We test out hypotheses all the time regardless of whether we eventually present or publish those, and so using SOTAL and that big tent of SOTAL as a kind of framework for all the sorts of things that we might do in a classroom.

**KL:** Okay, so because you've worked with faculty on, I'm assuming a huge range of projects under this tent of what SOTAL can be, I wonder if you can talk about some of the common challenges that you find faculty encountering as they're starting to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

**JE:** Yeah, there are a couple that I see most frequently when one is time. I think a particular challenge with SOTAL is that research ideas might come to us in real time. Right and what I mean by that is we may be teaching on a Tuesday and an idea suddenly comes to us. Wouldn't it be great if I could see if this strategy on Thursday worked better than the one that I use today and wouldn't it be even better if I could eventually get data on that and share that with others and so the quickness and the speed at which total ideas can come to us and need to be implemented.

I think is one particular challenge. Another challenge is that SOTAL should at least you know, ideally be a type of scholarly approach that folks can take regardless of discipline, but there are some disciplines that work with human subjects more frequently than others. And so understanding the process of putting in an IRB protocol or putting together a kind of experiment that works with our students that uses kind of experimental framework there. I think that is another challenge. There's always the challenge and I think this is probably true regardless of institution, although some may be better than others I'm not sure, but there's always the challenge of institutional incentive and how much recognition does SOTAL get in comparison to other kinds of research and scholarship.

And so that that I think is at least weighs on faculties’ minds a little bit. Okay, well, is this the same kind of thing as other sorts of research and so I know that can sometimes be a challenge as well.

**KL:** Okay, so for people who are listening to this and they're intrigued they want to know a little bit more about Scholarship of Teaching and Learning they're interested in maybe just getting started.

What advice would you have for folks who are new to SOTAL and who are just kind of starting out?

**JE:** Sure. Well, I think the best advice that I could give is when ideas pop up in the course of teaching that intrigue us about whether or not method A might work better with our students than Method B or something similar to that. To jot it down and to consider going a step beyond just the natural kinds of or the assessment that we always do as teachers this work the student this this is better than this to move a step beyond that and write it down and maybe sketch out some notes on what it might look like to put that together as a project.

You know, what was additional information would we need? Why might this be important to think about for teaching learning writ large those sorts of things? So really, trying to sort of ease the pathway of SOTAL by framing it as this isn't necessarily anything that we wouldn't be doing anyway, but now we just make an additional step to formalizing the sorts of changes or hypotheses about teaching that we bring to the classroom anyway. Beyond that another piece of advice would be to see what Avenues there are at your University for supporting SOTAL. There might already be groups who are doing this kind of work who meet regularly or there may be funding streams for SOTAL work at your University or the teaching center might have programs to support SOTAL. So seeking out resources and kind of a support network I think is also a piece of advice that I would give to anyone who's really interested in kind of testing the waters for the first time.

**KL:** Awesome. All right, we're going to take another brief break, when we come back we'll hear a little bit more from Josh about how he has started an umbrella IRB at his institution to support Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Josh, one of the things I know that you recently set up for folks at your institution who are pursuing scholarship of teaching and learning is an umbrella IRB and I'm wondering if you can talk about what that is and maybe how you would distinguish it from like a blanket IRB?

**JE:** Sure definitely. Always happy to talk about this, we're really proud of the program here and it's again the result of several years of collaboration. So it's interesting in that we initially pursued it as a blanket IRB and a couple of well actually more than a couple of years ago. But when I first moved into teaching and learning center work, I was drawn to the notion of setting up a protocol that any faculty could join who was interested in doing research on her or his teaching, to kind of make the process easier and it provides a smoother pathway that sort of thing. So when I came to Rice I partnered with one of our psychologists Andy Parsons who’s amazing, and she and I wrote it together. But so we were initially pursuing it as a blanket and called it a blanket because it covers anyone who would be doing any kind of research on teaching and learning, and through the process and through negotiating with the chair of our IRB, who’s also our associate vice president of institutional effectiveness, and through people in our sponsored programs office. Eventually we transformed it from a blanket to an umbrella, and it might sound like semantics but there's a real difference between the two, and they made the absolutely spot-on point that a blanket IRB can be problematic because there are no parameters everyone's covered for everything.

What we needed was an umbrella and umbrella differs from a blanket in at least two key ways, one is that it has really clearly distinguished parameters, you know something sits under an umbrella and those parameters for us meant that to be a part of the program you would need to be doing research on Rice students in a particular Rice course, that means that at least someone on the investigative team needs to be the instructor of the course. And it had to be traditional pedagogical research, which essentially means things you might otherwise be doing in the classroom and you're doing some research to see which is more effective as opposed to studies that might move more into social psychological territory where you ask students about demographic information, disability status, for example. Those types of studies are not a part of our umbrella IRB. If someone wants to do that kind of work we could file a separate modification, but it's it might serve them better to put in their own individual IRB.

And another one of the parameters then is the investigators all have to be a part of Rice. So no external investigators for this particular program. So that's one definite way that an umbrella IRB differs from a blanket in that there are clear parameters, and the other way it differs is that someone has to hold an umbrella. And so I'm the point person I’m the P.I. for the umbrella program. Meaning that the study, the protocol that I put into the IRB relates to teaching related research at Rice that fits the parameters I just described and then any faculty who want to join our program submit as modifications to my initial protocol. So I'm holding the umbrella and people gradually huddle under the umbrella with me, but I'm the one holding it and they have to have to kind of adhere to those parameters that we talked about before. So those are two clear distinctions, I think it was definitely for the better of the program, it does exclude certain types of research but to get the program off the ground, I think this it was a really important step to make those kind of boundaries pretty clear.

**KL:** Okay, so that's a really helpful articulation of some of those differences. I'm curious Josh if you can share just to make this really concrete for our listeners, what are some of the problems that an umbrella IRB can solve? Like why would you want to go about doing this versus having everyone kind of do their own IRB protocol?

**JE:** Sure, there are a couple. One is to make the process easier, especially for people in disciplines that don't normally do human subjects research. So the form that people fill out to join the program is two pages and it requires at most, three paragraphs to kind of fill out the form and then also the people need to submit any survey questions or things like that that they might ask as a part of the program. But it reduces substantially the amount of information that needs to be provided because my mine and Sandy’s, she's my co-P.I., our initial protocol laid out all those substances of the study and so they don't need to provide that. The other way it makes things easier is that because they're submitting those things as a modification to my study. It makes the approval process really quick. So takes between three and five days for those studies to get approved and you know as I was saying earlier, one of the challenges of SOTAL is that a lot of these ideas come to us real time, that three to five-day turnaround can be really advantageous to actually be implementing these ideas. So that in particular is the change that a lot of our social scientists like, the quick turnaround time, and the shorter form, and the way we've sort of streamline the process makes it really attractive to those in disciplines who don't normally do human subjects research, because we're also here to help them with that paperwork and to answer any questions that they might have. It kind of takes some of the, I think, time out of the equation that they might otherwise put into really write in one of their individual IRBs.

So it solves some of those problems but more than that, I think it also helps put the spotlight on teaching related research at the University. We had 16 studies join last year and we have at least four that have already been submitted for this year. And so people feel like there's some incentive to join, that there's a community recognizing the research that happens as a part of that, and so I think there's a way that the program itself helps to bring some recognition to the work of teaching research.

**KL:** Okay, so this is super interesting. I'm sure there are people listening who are wondering: How do you even go about doing this? What is the process of setting up an umbrella IRB and maybe in particular, what are some of the challenges of going through that process? I would imagine you have to partner pretty closely with your institutional IRB office to move something like this forward.

We do yes, and you know, one of the great aspects of Rice is that our sized actually allows those kind of close collaborations and professional relationships to develop and so we we're not quite siloed as I think some other places sometimes are and so, you know after the time we spend in kind of putting together our initial ideas for it, the first person that we then reached out to is the compliance officer for our office of sponsored programs. And so every IRB protocol goes by her first, and so we met with her to explain our ideas to get her feedback on the idea to ask her: Were there any obstacles that we needed to consider? What would make this, you know, a workable program from her perspective working in compliance? And so we met with her several times, took her feedback into account in multiple revisions, and then from there we met with the chair, three of us, then went to the chair of the IRB to talk about the program, you know, he had other kinds of things that we needed to keep in mind and under consideration. That's when we change from blanket to umbrella and we really clarified some of those parameters. So it is I mean, so one of the challenges it is a process, and it does require I think, some patients first of all, but also the kind of close collaboration with other members of the University community in order to really implement it and make sure it has a kind of solid foundation going forward.

So we worked with them in total, the process was probably about two years, from putting some ideas down on paper to beginning to launch the program, but it was time well worth spent. It does require time and patience though and those close collaborations.

**KL:** Well Josh, I want to thank you so much for sharing a little bit about this process at your institution and also for talking with us about your new book: How Humans Learn, and how you're supporting SOTAL more broadly. Thanks so much for taking the time to come on the show.

**JE:** Thank you Katie, I appreciate it.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of research and action. I'm Katie Linder and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** Josh I would really love to have you talk about how you are maintaining dual pipelines for your research, because as you are working on this How Humans Learn book, you also have been maintaining a pipeline for your medieval studies work. Which is pretty different than what you worked on for this book. Can you talk a little bit about that, how you managed to maintain those two pipelines over time?

**JE:** Sure absolutely. My identity is medievalist and my medieval research is always going to be an important part of my professional life, and so I think part of the key has been to choose projects wisely, and to be able to find the right balance between my teaching/learning work and the medieval work. So my own little corner of medieval studies is medieval disabilities studies, and there is a small but growing community of people who study that and who write about it, talk about it, that work together, and have conferences on it. So what I have tried to do to continue my work in that area is a couple of things: One is to take on an organizational role and so we have a group called the society for the study of disability in the Middle Ages. And for a long time I had kind of passed on the baton to somebody, for a long time I had organized the conference sessions for that society, I kind of spearheaded a couple of projects, like an open access textbook. Some of them I was a general editor for. I would kind of do some administrative work and bring people together for them. And then to choose projects like writing shorter pieces for collections of essays, I did one of those.

I’m the co-editor on a volume of essays that we should be getting to the publisher soon on medieval disability and so finding projects that would allow me to be engaged, that would allow me to keep writing but also make room for the teaching and learning work, both the book and the research of course, but also the kind of day to day activities which can be a real challenge. And one of the things we believe in strongly in our CTE is work-life balance, so maintaining that is a priority and finding ways to engage in both areas, really comes down to I think picking the right project and being, for me it was being patient to find those ways that I could contribute without sacrificing some of these other elements and so because most of my career is working in medieval literature, writing a book on teaching and learning that went in a variety of different directions and disciplines I’ve never worked in, was truly a humbling experience.

I have to say that I really benefitted from the kindness and patience of friends and colleagues who could answer questions for me when I needed those answers and who could help me see new ways to go when I ran into some road blocks there. So it was an entirely different experience, it was very rewarding experience to engage in community practices and scholarly groups that I otherwise may never have been a part of has I not taken on this project. But overall it was just a very different but very rewarding work delving into those other disciplines.

**KL:** Thanks so much for sharing a little bit more about your experience with dual pipelining Josh.

**JE:** Thank you Katie.