Episode 138: Heather Corwin

# KL: Katie Linder

# HC: Heather Corwin

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

# [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, Dr. Heather L. Corwin earned her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology with a somatic concentration from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology (L.A.) and her M.F.A. in Acting/Theatre from Florida State University/A solo Conservatory. She teaches courses that investigate behavior, impulse awareness, effective communication styles, stamina, physical storytelling, style, actions, and identifying needs. Her research focus looks at the impacts of emotional intelligence, actor training, psychological well-being and stress management. She serves as the Editor-in-Chief of The Players Journal and has published articles spanning great teaching, research methods, interdisciplinary fields, sensory awareness, empathy, the therapeutic relationship, and the relationship between actor training and emotional intelligence. As an actress, her work has been seen in countries all over the world. She has performed in award winning network television and regional theater throughout the U.S. As a coach, Heather works with individuals to best understand needs, actions to suit the needs, identifying behavior in others, and producing results under pressure.  In 2017, Dr. Corwin was nominated for the distinction of Undergraduate Research and Artistry Day Faculty Member of the Year at NIU.  For years, Dr. Corwin served as the Head of Movement for actor training at Northern Illinois University.

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

**HC:** My pleasure, great to be here Katie.

**KL:** So I'm really interested in kind of diving into some of your work with actor training research, and I'm wondering if you can just start by sharing a little bit about it. What are some of the kinds of things that you look at in this area?

**HC:** Sure, well the type of research that I conduct has to do with examining the relationship between actors training. Specifically the Meissner method and its relationship with emotional intelligence skills, and those skills are empathy, aspect regulation, or emotional regulation with yourself and with others, and theory of mind. So the work that I do focuses on that and tries to determine at which point during this type of actor training emotional intelligence skills can be impacted. So that's what I’m primarily working on.

**KL:** Okay, so I'm really curious what methodologies and forms of data you use for this kind of research, because it sounds like it could be kind of complicated.

**HC:** It's really complicated. So, the intervention itself is the Meissner Actor Training, and the test that we use is an emotional intelligence test. The oldest one in the field is the one that use, the Mesquite version 2.0, and we did a pre-test and we did a post-test. So the pre-test happened before a semester of actor training and then the post-test after and we discovered in 16 weeks that in this pilot study, emotional intelligence skills are not impacted but other researchers have found that if different artistic skills are looked at over the duration of two years, that emotional intelligence skills in children especially, are impacted. So there haven't been many studies on adults which is my participant demographic population, and I feel like adults can change their emotional intelligence skills. Other researchers have found this to be true and so I just want to see if this particular acting method does teach these skills.

**KL:** Okay, so this is interesting. I’m curious what initially drew you to this research and to connect actor training with emotional intelligence. Like what was kind of the origin story for that?

**HC:** Well I have an MFA from a top ten University and my dad is a teacher of science, and so STEM in America, science, engineering, technology, mathematics, is very valued and the jobs that people get in STEM areas usually pay very well, whereas artists, as most people know don't get paid very well and the work that we do isn't valued as much, and this always bothered me because I feel like the value that artists bring to life creates wellness, articulates experience, helps us understand our histories, our choices how we exist in the world and all of these ways of being, helped create our culture, and that's a really important mechanism for how to exist. I scientifically wants to prove to my dad and our culture that the value that we have as artists is intrinsic and should be cherished.

**KL:** Okay, connect that for me to this study. Like thinking about the emotional intelligence piece and what you're trying to measure. What does that show about the value?

**HC:** What I think it shows about the value is the same skills that are taught in the Sanford Meissner actor training exercises translate directly to skills of emotional intelligence. So, for example, one of the exercises is repetition. So what this repetition is, at the onset, kind of sounds like five-year-olds just making fun of each other repeating exactly what they say, but the crux of the exercise when done well and recognizing impulses has to do with understanding what the behavior is telling us and giving us as information of the state of being of the other person rather than relying on the words. If I say, “I'm fine” you say “I’m fine, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine,” you don’t sound fine. So I mean that was really short encapsulated versions but trying to identify what's really happening allows us to understand aspect regulation and engage in empathy, to really try to crawl into another person’s experience. So that's how I feel that this type of actor training and this type of research helps people evolve and identify the skills of emotional intelligence.

**KL:** Okay, so you also just described kind of earlier in this segment something that many researchers have experienced, which is you do the study and you don't really find what you maybe thought was there for what you were hoping for, so I would love to have you talk a little bit about that like what is kind of the initial response and then the pivot from that in terms of, you know, where do you go from there if you aren't kind of coming out of the findings that maybe you hypothesized were there in the beginning?

**HC:** I love that question because initially I think every person who does a study is like, this is going to change the world, and when that hypothesis doesn't quite make it, it’s very discouraging but what I discovered was a resilience to knowledge. The fact that it doesn't happen in 16 weeks or under 16 weeks and it being a change in emotional intelligence level means that according to other researchers in two years it can change but where is that critical moment where it does change in adults? Somewhere between 16 weeks and two years so that information moves me forward into the study that I'm currently conducting which is a two-year longitudinal study looking at factors training nationally through USC, Northern Illinois University, and Coastal Carolina University, and seeing if engaged in different areas of the Arts, that does emotional intelligence change? So that's where that led me and it's exciting when you come up against information that is clear and that’s the way I had to think about this instead of this isn't significant, well no it's not significant as far as the findings but what is encouraging is I’m closer to an answer, and that's what I have to hold on to.

**KL:** So, Heather, one of the things I'm hearing in this is the resilience you have, you know, having a door shut and looking for the window, but also that you’re open to that opportunity and I think that is just such a lesson for researchers who are maybe new to projects, to thinking about, you know, it’s not that you shifted entirely what you were researching, but you asked different kind of question and you were able to kind of integrate what you learned into a new project in really useful way.

**HC:** Absolutely, well and to me that's what, that resilience is what will make sustaining career because if I just see every research project that doesn't end significantly as a failure, I can't move forward. I have to take the findings as encouragement and as a path of where to move forward because I know that I have more answers, I have more knowledge, and now I get to determine what to do with that.

**KL:** Excellent. Okay, we're going to take brief break when we come back we're going to hear a little bit more from Heather about conducting embodied research. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Heather, one of the kind of interesting things that I read about in your bio is that you are a certified Rolfer, and I wondered if you could explain a little bit about what that means for our listeners.

**HC:** I'd be delighted, so Ida Rolf was a biochemist, she herself was a doctor of biochemistry and she was fascinated by fascia, or the connective tissue in the body, and what she dedicated her life to was creating and codifying a process to address the body through hands-on work, called structural integration, and when someone goes through Rolfing the idea is that the fascia will be shifted to create more structural alignment, ease function and so the body is free of discomfort or pain and can move with more range and flexibility than it had done before.

**KL:** Okay so can you give us kind of an image of what this might look like if you're engaging in Rolfing or you're working with someone who's been trained in real thing? Like, what kind of things are happening in that moment?

**HC:** Sure. Well, I liken it to massage therapy or being in a massage therapist room because a lot of people are familiar with that experience, and the main differences are, as a client, you work usually an underwear or a bathing suit two-piece bathing suit and what I will do at the beginning of our session is watch you move. I'll have you walk in the room and I see how your body reacts in gravity and then we'll get you on the table and I will use things like knuckles and elbows to slowly move your tissue in a way that if any adhesions are in the bodies they will be addressed and melted to allow the body to easily function.

**KL:** Okay, so one of the ways that it does actually, and one of the things that this is kind of reminding me of, because I think the thing that I hear a lot about when it comes to working with fascia is the idea of foam rolling and trying to kind of, so if anyone's familiar with foam rolling, it's a way of kind of massaging as like self-massage, after you do a run something like that. So this sounds like a more kind of personalized, a way of doing that but you're working with an individual who's helping you. Is that kind of a one way to describe it?

**HC:** I think that’s an excellent way to describe it and you can talk to the foam roller, which is me, so that we can work at a pace that your body can integrate the work without you feeling like when I work with a foam roller I always feel like my scalp is about to come unglued even if I'm just working on my IT band or the side of my leg. So it's less intense, Rolfing bridges an intensity level with integration so that sometimes foam rolling it just freaking hurts, and that’s okay.

**KL:** So I'm really curious, people are probably thinking, like, why are you asking about this? How does this relate to research? I do have connection. I am curious because so much of your research is about actor training and, you know, the body, how the body moves and this is a lot of what your training has been in as well I'm curious how this training in Rolfing impacts your research, if at all, you know, like, does it impact the way that you are thinking about actor training or looking at how the body moves in these different areas of your research?

**HC:** I think the somatic work that I do and the body work that I do most definitely has informed how I work as an educator, as a researcher, and as a person. So in my body there's always some sort of conflict or barrier that is not allowing you to express the way you want to, and sometimes that barrier creates pain. So what we do is we create awareness around that barrier to facilitate choices of how to move forward. Sometimes it's Rolfing, sometimes it's movement education, sometimes it's you're dehydrated, you just need some more water I mean sometimes the answers are easier than others, but what the body has taught me is if you can identify what the problem is, you can then create awareness around it, which for a research question is doing all the research, going and reading up with all of the wonderful ideas and different studies that have been conducted throughout the field that help you understand the question better and to see if the questions been answered and then you better understand what question you're trying to ask. So, when you're asking a question, you have better feedback which usually that question would then be some sort of qualitative instrument to measure and then you go from there. So that's how I see the metaphor for body, and for research, and for education. Just understanding the barrier awareness and then how you want to move forward with the choices you have before you.

**KL:** That’s really fascinating. Okay, so Heather I’m curious what some of the challenges are of doing research on the use of the body because this does seem to me something that could be seen as kind of subjective, you know like how do you kind of do this in a way that is kind of rigorous, and other people will see as being kind of research worthy?

**HC:** Well that's an excellent question and I think artists themselves sometimes get in the way of having really quality research being conducted because a lot of artists enjoy that, art is mystical, it is elusive, it is something that only geniuses can do, and don't know that's going to help research as a whole move forward, because you can't reproduce what it is that you do, you can't conduct research. So I just want to say that that can be problematic within the artistic community as an unknown bias and sometimes known, but often it's not evening their consciousness. Another challenge is just the complexity of being human. So I'm doing these studies on actors who are studying Meissner after training. They're taking an emotional intelligence test before and after this training, and I'm not looking at other areas that could complicate their abilities to successfully engage in emotional intelligence skills for example, Attachment Theory created by John Bowlby.

So briefly and quickly attachment theory is a baby's ability to successfully communicate and feel the baby’s needs heard by the caregiver, whomever that is. Their primary caregivers. Bowlby basically determined that if baby’s needs are listening to 70% of the time, they will have a secure attachment mean you can get it wrong 30% of the time, and I didn't look to see if these actors have secure attachment what this might mean, is if the actors don't have secure attachment they might not have as much confidence in their ability to act on their impulses as somebody who does have secure attachment. There are so many other possible complicating factors that could be problematic when measuring anything. So what I tried to do as a researcher is be very kind to myself, acknowledge the limitations and the scope because this could send anybody down the rabbit hole and what I need to do as a researcher is be crystal clear what I’m looking for, crystal clear if there are obvious complications or limitations to my study, which I would acknowledge in the study, to be ethically, with an integrity, as a researcher and then just move forward as the best I can. So I think it's actually prevalent through all research but these are things that I come up against continually.

**KL:** That is such an overview of the challenges. I mean I can just imagine it's complicated and so it's difficult and I think you've just articulated that very well. We're going to take another brief break, when we come back we're going to hear a little bit more from Heather about kind of her situated-ness as an interdisciplinary researcher. Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Heather, throughout the last couple of segments we have talked about a pretty diverse range of interests that you have, from doing your research on actor training, to being a certified Rolfer. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about how you see all of these things coming together particularly in terms of like academic discipline, because I could imagine that it is a little bit challenging to kind of meld some of these things and bring all of these interests together in a way that you can kind of clearly articulate them to other people.

**HC:** I would agree with that, I mean once you become an interdisciplinary scholar, you have taken away your ability to hang your hat in a very pure home. So finding colleagues who are able to straddle the different disciplines with you is difficult and very satisfying when you find them. So I guess the things that tie everything together for me have to do with building awareness, understanding behavior, impulse recognition and how that applies to action, and then communication all informed by emotional intelligence. So I recently left an academic institution where I was the head of movement for actor training to pursue consulting and my Rolfing practice, and what I do with consulting has to do with helping people identify the parts of relationships that are satisfying and that help people continue those relationships. An example would be a medical marketing firm in Chicago. I worked with them because they are very deadline-driven and the clients that they have are insistent on timelines and want the shortest possible time. Which totally makes sense to everyone and to offer a good product sometimes, time is needed to be able to make sure there's quality.

So there's that a big conflict there, the tug and pull, and so we focus on areas of relationship like trust and active listening to be able to facilitate a satisfying relationship where everyone feels valued and heard. And I've also been working with educational institutions working in this way as well. So when researchers find that academia isn’t always working for them, or they haven’t found the right academic home, there's still value in the private sector to be able to express and bring people together in ways that are very satisfying. And for my Rolfing practice, I had the honor of working with people who face a lot of different challenges, I mean some people come to me just because they don't stand up straight and they would like to look better when they see themselves in the mirror. That's valid. I also work with people who are cancer survivors who I help regain motion for example in breast cancer survivors I help them regain full range of motion in their arms if they've had double mastectomy, and work like that and working with Parkinson’s, people who suffer from Parkinson’s, helping people remind their bodies about the resources they have internally to make them external is really satisfying work and a joy to witness and be a guide to these people to help them be the best people they can be.

**KL:** So, Heather, I can imagine that some people’s ears perked up when you mentioned that you'd recently left an academic institution to pursue consulting and some of this other work. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about that decision in terms of you know, clearly you're still engaging in some of this research that's interesting to you and you're still doing consulting work that's allowing you to do that, but can you talk a little bit about taking that leap because I think for a lot of people that would feel very risky.

**HC:** I think it still feels risky even in the doing of it but I think when you listen to the deep part of your heart that is honest and tells you where you can do your best work that is supported by those people around you if the answer comes up that this is not the place and these are not the people, I had to honor that and it was time for me to move on, and it's nobody's fault it’s just what is. I also believe that there is an academic home for me somewhere that I might really enjoy, I just haven't found it yet, and as long as we’re being honest with ourselves and with the people around us, I think everything works out. Integrity to me is really important, and life is too short to languish anywhere, so it gives everyone the opportunity to work with the colleagues who are best suited to them.

**KL:** So one of the things I know that you have taught before is the idea of physical storytelling and I feel like one of the things you're describing here is this idea of kind of reflecting on your own story and how do you kind of know how to make decisions about where to go next. Can you talk a little bit about what were some of the things that helped you figure out next steps in terms of making this bigger decision in your career? What were some of the things that helped you to know you were headed in the right direction?

**HC:** Well, I started looking consulting. When other doors we’re—back to the doors and windows—when other doors closed and other windows opened, I really listened to the feedback that is being given to me which is, “I'd like to hire you to do this, I'd like to hire you to do that,” and when people are able to acknowledge my skillset and understand what I can bring to their group or to their body. This is an understanding of where I am best in the world, so sometimes those little events that you can't ignore or dismiss as that that really wasn't that important, when they asked me to do that that was just a one-off thing. I don‘t actually believe that to be true. I think when an opportunity is given to you, especially the first time, like the first consulting gig that I had, I think it’s an eye-opening experience where I am shown very explicitly the skills that I have and how I can manifest more work and more impact in the world, and that’s exciting to me. So I usually follow what’s exciting to me rather than what’s safe. Not everybody does that might also be the actor in me. I'm okay with little bit of not knowing what's next not everybody is. So you also have to understand your tolerance for risk and risk has always paid off for me. So that’s another truth, doesn't always payoff for everyone, and I'm really fortunate that I also have people around me who encouraged me and who believe in me, which helped me move, helps me move forward.

**KL:** Well this has been super interesting to hear about this journey for you. I'm curious. Heather, what’s next? What are some of the things that you’re pursuing in your research that you’re looking forward to?

**HC:** Well, I'm actually doing data analysis on a study I conducted with the graduate students at Northern Illinois University and they worked with a community member, and the only directive was when you interview this community member they have to make you slightly uncomfortable which means I just didn't want them to interview someone who was just like them. So they videotaped a 20 minute or so interview and then they worked with that interviews foundational imaginative work for a variety of exercises throughout the semester, including a performance at the end that was a monologue of them in cabining the person they interviewed and then I interviewed those graduate students afterward to discover if this was qualitative phenomenological study. Looking at did that type of engagement impact empathy in any way, and so I'm analyzing that data. Also right now and seeing what themes emerge and that's really exciting. So that's one of the things I’m working on. And then the other is I am creating online classes in somatic psychology for continuing education for marriage and family therapists and counselors and that should be up and running in January.

**KL:** Wow okay, well, Heather, this isn't fascinating. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing about how you're kind of doing this work on your own terms. It's been really interesting to hear about and thank you so much for your time.

**HC:** My pleasure, Katie, thank you. Anytime.

**KL:** And 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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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode 138 of the research and action podcast Dr. Heather Corwin suggests movement options for researchers take a listen

**KL:** Heather as we both know the life of researcher can be quite sedentary. I'm wondering if you have movement recommendations for researchers who may be a little tired of sitting at their desks.

**HC:** I do Katie, one of the things that I learned after sitting for hours and hours reading and trying to create this body of work specifically for my dissertation is what I'm recalling had to do with if I didn't get up every hour not only would my body hurt but I didn't think as well when time progressed. So what I would recommend for researchers out there is some sort of app or timer that reminds you to get up and move around, because studies have shown that the more you move the blood in your body the more your brain works actively and the better you are at tackling ideas and finding ingenious ways to look at your research, conduct your research, and ask the best questions. So some things to think about are exercise balls to sit on. You could also get those tables that automatically move at different times which are wonderful. And just find ways to make sure you're moving your body so that you can do the best research you are capable of at all times.

**KL:** One of the things I loved about the suggestion Heather, is that you're not saying to move in a particular way, you're not first driving you should do yoga, you should go for a run, or you should you know, do squats or whatever it might be it's just the movement at all is going to help and whether that's standing up, and you know walking down the hall way, you know like that's still going to make a difference for people. So we're not talking about you know going out for a midday workout necessarily which I think is a lot more reasonable for many researchers.

**HC:** Yes well and just a walk can be wonderful, or get up and stretch. Do some deep breathing. Anything that gets you moving and thinking is wonderful.

**KL:** Well thanks so much for these suggestions, Heather.

**HC:** Thank you.

**KL:** You've just heard a bonus clip from episode 138 of the research in action podcast with Dr. Heather Corwin suggesting movement options for researchers. Thanks for listening.