Episode 141: Gail Crimmins

# KL: Katie Linder

# GC: Gail Crimmins

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

# [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. Gail Crimmins, who initially trained as a performer and worked as a performer, director and casting director in theatre, television and film in the UK for almost 10 years.  She subsequently taught Drama and Performance at universities and conservatoires before moving to Australia in 2008. Gail undertook her PhD study (an arts-informed narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of women casual academics) alongside part-time teaching and fully committed mothering. She currently works as a Lecturer of Communication, coordinates a series of Communication Programs, and is the First Year Experience Lead for the School of Communication and Creative Industries, at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia.  She undertakes arts-informed, narrative and auto-ethnographic research, predominantly though not exclusively, exploring the lived experience of women academics. Gail is a feminist researcher who seeks to illuminate the impacts of patriarchal structures on women’s lives and explore ways for women’s stories and voices to be heard.

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

**GC:** Oh, you’re very welcome. Thanks for inviting me, Katie.

**KL:** So I’m really excited to hear about some of your research that is very arts informed, and I thought it would be helpful at first to start our listeners with what is arts informed research; how do you define it?

**GC:** Um. There are a number of different splinter or sister categories, so some people refer to this as arts-based research, some people refer to it as arts-informed research, um I particularly talk about it in terms of being art informed research, and it’s a form of qualitative research. Usually, although not exclusively, based in social and health sciences that is informed by but not based in the arts. Um some practice of arts-informed approaches to research merge the methodical and rigorous processes of social science inquiry with the artistic and the imaginative form and qualities of the arts. Um its main aim is to enhance our understanding of the human condition through alternative to conventional representation in forms of research inquiry. It also aims to work towards reaching audiences both emotionally and cognitively within and beyond the academy, and achieves this by employing forms of research representation that resist, what I call the masculine, and very linear, very teleological structure of traditional academic discourse, and creating forms of communication that are usually more accessible an aesthetic to an audience.

**KL:** So I can imagine that arts informed research crosses disciplines. Is there kind of a way that these scholars identify themselves to – to each other as they’re kind of crossing these disciplines?

**GC:** So I think there is some confusion, and I think that there is perhaps some misconception, even potentially some fear around what arts informed research is and where the boundaries blur. Um there – there are terms around arts informed research. Some arts informed researchers call themselves ‘scholartist’, which is this beautiful blending, or merging of scholarship with artistry. And the term ‘ScholARTistry’ was coined by Lorri Nielson in um – I thought it was as early as 2000, which was again used to describe the scholarship – um the art -so a scholarship of art and um art of scholarship. So there is this beautiful bicultural, if you like, interaction between the two. And ScholARTistry, or arts informed researcher, or art informed researchers or scholartist as we refer to each other and ourselves as, really challenge the dichotomization of scientific research and creativity in art. Um ScholARTistry describes the mutually informing, mutually beneficial and equivalent relationship between academic scholarship and artistic process and function. So as we know, and we could look and go as far back as [*indiscernible*] if you’d like to thinking about how dichotomies and different values associated with different types of knowledge, and different ways of know, different ways of researching have existed. But certainly in tradition or most academic environments, certain forms of research are often given higher value or are considered to a higher value than others. So I think um – I think scholartist have some challenges as well that we face in terms of really trying to promote our form of research as something that is alternative to the conventional, but certainly no lesser; if you know what I mean. It’s a hybrid practice, and it combines languages used in the literary, the visual, and the performing arts uh with scholarly practices of the social sciences, and um it should not undermine or make lesser either of those two practices. So the arts –within that creative practice, within that process, is no lesser than but it’s also no greater than the very incisive um research practices the arts informed research has engaged in. So for example, one of the research practices that I engage in is narrative inquiry, and I am just as thorough and rigorous in my practice of narrative inquiry as I am in restoring those narratives into a physical, and visual, and theatrical form. So the artistic practice, if you’d like, happens after, in my case, the rigorous methodical practice of scholarship which creates the data of what I then use, and present and re-present in an artistic way. So it’s that hybridity and that interdisciplinarity, which is both exciting, and [*indiscernible*], aestheticizing, but also potentially causes some challenge around how do I define it, what is the value of it, how does it fit traditional notions of what is research and what is art? Um but I would certainly say that merging of scholarship with artistry can actually achieve quite significant um aims – um not the least of which is to bring or make accessible ideas and data within research within research that have traditionally been inaccessible to most audiences.

**KL:** So this occurs to me that it could be, as you’ve mentioned, pretty challenging to traditional notions of scholarship, and maybe even intentionally kind of destabilizing those notions as well. Can you speak to that a little bit in terms of how this is defined?

**GC:** Yeah. I like the word of intentionality or being, you know – having a very clear aim or remit around what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. And that’s the same with all of our research, isn’t it? We don’t – we should not just fall upon a form of inquiry or a form of communicating that inquiry because it already exists, or because it’s easy, or because it’s uh – expected. I think that we need to think really critically every time we engage in a new form of inquiry, what is the – what is the most appropriate methodology, what is the most appropriate method or set of methods for this inquiry, and also what are the most appropriate dissemination practices or processes for the type of data that I will uncover? Or, now that I have this data, what are the most appropriate dissemination communication strategies for this particular data? So rather than thinking – you know, rather than planning the whole project at the front and saying, “This is the way that I’m going to gather the data, this is what I’m going to do with the data once I have it, and this is what I’m going to do when I disseminate” I think it requires a flexibility and something called an emerging presence. So out of the inquiry and the data that is being created, there should be an emergence, if you’d like, of now that we have this, what is the most appropriate way in which we can analyze, or think about, or categorize, or re-story, or reform this for public – for a public audience? And then there’s questions around now that I have that data, what is the best form for which to communicate and engage an audience with this? So that’s another challenge I suppose, is that you can’t necessarily know that the beginning of a project what the very end of a project is likely to look like, and this challenges dominant funding models. The way that grant schemes are set up often set up, requires us to very, very clearly identify not only what will happen but how much time will be spent on each phase of research, what resources are required for each phase of research, and even to also preempt what the result of that inquiry will be. Well if we knew that, why are we doing the research? So I think that um – I think it does fly in the face of some of those dominant defending models, and also the way that I was allocated to research practice within universities. Um I also think that the deliberateness, if you’d like … I’m not sure if that’s the word, but you know – to be deliberate in choosing the form of inquiry and the form of dissemination, can be informed by a critical lens as well. And by that I mean if, and I speak as a feminist researcher – if as a feminist, I identify that the dominant discourses within a particular area, let’s say higher education - or let’s say casualization within higher education – if the dominant discourses are presented through a positivist lens and they focus on statistics. How many there are, how many casual academics there are within the university sector, what is he demographic of those, you know what percentage are female what percentage are male, what is the age breakdown? For me, a critical lens would say, well that’s not telling me how casualization has emerged or what the impact of casualization is on the academics themselves, or what is the impact on the student experience? So very often you need to adopt a critical lens to think outside of the forms of traditional research that have been used to examine that particular phenomenon. So there is a deliberateness – and certainly there’s a deliberateness in the way that I adopt, as I’ve mentioned narrative inquiry, and I’ve mentioned arts informed research, and deliberateness for me is around traditional forms of academic communication. Um and by that I mean that if we look at a traditional journal article, we note that is usually presented in a third person objective, neutral uh voice or stance, that there are very particular segments – you might have an introduction, there will be a background which will contextualize the area of research into terms of what’s gone on before, what’s know about this area, what previous literature has there been in this area, and then there will be these very clear kind of subheadings, or methodologies and methods, and the data - maybe a few tables, maybe a few graphs. Um but the sentences and the paragraph structures are fascinating to me, because they actually present themselves with a pseudo-neutrality. A pseudo-neutrality that is presented as being genderless, that is presented as being outside of any class distinctions that is presented as being objective and neutral. Well, I question that many of us, within – within areas where we use qualitative research processes, question that, because we, as researchers, are already in the research. We’ve invested our time, our thought, our ideas. The fact that we are researching it means that we, as individuals within very complex socio-economic cultural environments, have identified a curiosity. You know, we’ve actually thought, “Wow. This is interesting to me.” So we’re already invested in the research and we’re already part of that research, because we’ve constructed the research question, and we’ve constructed the methodology. Uh so I suppose I deliberately reject this notion of neutrality within research communication, uh and I also reject the masculinity of the terse, objective, very middle class uh dialect and tone with which we’re supposed to present in an academic journal, or most academic traditional forms. Um and I’ve written about this in much of my research as well, so I deliberately reject that very masculine form, and part of my arts informed research inquiry therefore, is offering an alternative to that. Where my authentic voice, and my way of knowing is represented and is intertextually enmeshed with the data that I engage with and that I have uncovered in my research inquiry, so I know that a lot of people choose arts informed inquiry, or non-traditional forms of inquiry to deliberately destabilize some of those very traditional and often positivist forms of research inquiry.

**KL:** So Gail, you are giving us so much to chew on in terms of what this means to engage with arts informed research. We’re going to take a brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more about some of the forms that this research can take, as well as some examples from Gail’s work. Back in a moment.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Gail, I’m wondering if you can offer us some kind of concrete ideas of what are the forms that arts informed research can take. For people who are listening and thinking, “This feels a little abstract to me” what are some of those forms? What do they look like?

**GC:** Uh so diverse. So if you think about how many art forms there are and available to us, I’d argue that most of those, if not all of those, could be used as forms for which to communicate research and research outcomes. The specific form that the arts informed researcher takes really depends largely on the artistic skill, and the experience of the researcher her or himself, as well as the substantive focus on the area of the research. Um and by that I mean, often research that involves communicating to other people, maybe through narrative inquiry, that lends itself to dialogues – so maybe to theater or to film. Whereas research that lends itself to internal inquiry, maybe thinking about or someone expressing their thoughts, their emotions, their values – that might lend itself more to maybe a visual form of inquiry such as photography, or sculpture, or poetry. So – look, it really depends on the expertise of the arts informed researcher her or himself, but also the nature of the inquiry. And I think something else that we do need to take care of here is that not everyone has the – has necessarily yet developed the skills they need to be a proficient arts informed inquirer, because it does actually require an artistic background or creative background. So you have to be able to realize an art – an artistic or an aesthetic output as well, but there is no one accepted definition or approach to arts informed inquiry. In terms of what those forms may be, examples include theater, film, photography, poetry as I’ve just mentioned, but also mosaic, uh short films, – uh – audio narrative only, um a series of images – you know, whether they’re painted or pencil drawn. So it’s whatever form of artistry the arts informed inquirer has at his or her disposal, and the nature of that would depend largely on the nature of the content. So although there isn’t one particular form, there are particular characteristics, if you like, or elements contained within arts informed work - and these include the use of expressive and vernacular language, the promotion of empathy or engagement with the audience, the presence of an aesthetic form, or forms or data collection of the analysis or representation of that inquiry. There’s an integrity in the relationship between the research topic and its form, and also arts informed inquiry should offer an opportunity to explore multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and reflexivity and the personal signature or presence of the researcher is also often embedded into forms of art, and forms of art inquiry.

**KL:** Gail, I would love to hearsome examples of this from your own work. Do you have some examples that you can share with us about how you’ve incorporated this into your research?

**GC:** Yeah. Um so the first major piece of arts-informed research that I engaged with was actually my Ph.D. study, and that was an arts informed narrative inquiry into the lived experience of living casual academics, so I’ll just give you a really brief kind of history to that and my engaging with that as a topic. I had worked as an academic, I was a senior lecturer in the UK for ten years, maybe just a little more, and um there’s some irony here because I do define myself as a feminist – I’m a feminist researcher, but in a very un-feminist move, I met an Australian man and he was very honest in the very beginning of our relationship that his intention was always to move back to Australia, and I decided that I would give up my career at that point and travel with Australia with him and to be with him. By the time my Visa came through I was several months pregnant and I literally had – by the time it came though I literally had two weeks to pack up our whole home and to move to the other side of the world, because I was going to be too pregnant to – to be able to fly any later than that. So when I arrive in Australia, I was a stay at home mom for a number of years and I had two children within 18 months… I don’t recommend it, but I was, you know, I was getting on a bit, and if I was going to have a second child, you know in terms of my health and the health the child, I needed to have that second child quite soon. So I was a stay at home mom for a couple of years, and it wasn’t for me. As much as I love my children, I wasn’t fully satisfied and fulfilled as a person, so I went back to – uh to academia. And the only work that I could get at that stage was as a sessional academic. Sessional academics are referred to differently in different parts of the world, so you might understand that as a casual academic, also an adjunct contract, so in other words someone who is just employed to work a particular semester for a number of hours, teaching into a, or two or more courses – whatever that is. And it was extraordinary to me having gone from this privilege of an on-going, quite singular role in a university – I had my own office, I had my phone, I could determine the content of my curricular and design that according to student needs and evolving industry trends. You know, I had autonomy, I had respect, and I loved my work – to somebody who was literally – I could be employed within an hour and I could also have my contract terminated within an hour if there weren’t enough students who had enrolled into that particular course or program module – whatever you call those in your institutions. So it was quite – it was confronting to me, and that’s what stimulated my area of inquiry, which was around the lived experience of the woman casual academic. Uhm so that – that’s what stimulated my inquiry, but my background actually is as a trade performer, and director, and theater director, and casting director, etcetera, and so I was really interested in what are the lives and the lived experiences of women casual academics, but I realized that they were embodied experiences. That they were full fleshed experiences, they weren’t – they didn’t lend themselves just to written communication, and so I decided that I wanted to represent those lives in the way that they were lived, embodied, interactive, etcetera. Um so that’s what I mean by an arts informed narrative inquiry. I took the narratives of women casual academics in Australia, I represented those in a form of theater. It’s actually called verbatim theater, where you literally use the words, the expressions of the research participants and you represent or re-story those in the form of performance. Um and I might just explain a little bit about how I re-storied those narratives, if that’s okay?

**KL:** Yeah! I’d love for you to elaborate on that. I mean, I think that’s something that people may not quite understand kind of what you’re talking about there, so yeah. Tell us more.

**GC:** Yeah. So we branded these terms around always doing a re-storied, but if you don’t actually know what that means then you’re not able to try that yourself. So as a feminist researcher, I consciously refuse to engage in that traditional masculine narrative analysis process of code and data. Um and what I mean by that is that there is a masculine way of knowing things that is around numbers, and that is around categorizations, and boxes. And for me as a fully embodied feminist researcher, actual life experience has more porosity than that, and I think that those narrow categorizations don’t necessarily give us a full understanding of lived experience – the way that it’s breathed, lived, felt, etcetera. So I chose instead to undertake a data narrative re-storying process, so there was another way – to show other ways of doing things and knowing in academia. The process required me to - . Well first of all, there wasn’t a written formula for me to follow, so I chose instead to merge two sort of approaches or process involve in re-storying. So first of all, there is a researcher called Gee – that’s ‘G’ double ‘E’, who in 2005 wrote and explained a process of holistic storying or re-storying, where you literally that the expressions – the full expressions of the data of the – of the participants including, for example pause, intonation, gesture, so that fully contextualized a set of data – not just the words themselves. And I merged that with what Ringrose and Renold called ‘affective intensities’, and what MacLure, Maggie MacLure, in 2013 talks about research that glows within us. So I’m just going to explain what I mean by that. So taking Gee’s process, I literally went through my – I think at that point I had about 15 hours of data – of narratives, and I – I just created general themes. One of those themes for example, was the in-betweenness of semesters, what – what casual academics feel and do in between semesters and that long wait in between semesters. And so I gathered all of their narratives – their fully embodied narratives, and by that I mean their pause, their pace, their tone, their intonation, the gesture that they used alongside that. I annotated their words with all of those codes of communications so that I was able to represent, when I presented those on stage, in a way that they had been presented to me in their original context. But I was – I still ended up with over nine hours of material and one as I mentioned a little earlier, very briefly – one benefit of arts informed inquiry is to make accessible. Well nobody is going to sit through a nine hour performance, so I knew that I had to find a way of editing this material down further, and that’s when I encountered Maggie MacLure’s writings on wonderful data. And what [*indiscernible*] means and talks about there, is the fact that some data that we encounter, that we find, that we create creates in u a sense of wonder – some data speaks more meaningfully to us than others, that it excites us. That perhaps when we’re reading, or engaging, or listening to some data, there is a quickening to our heartbeat or – we almost want to eat it or consume it, and be embodied by it, because it’s so vibrant to us. And so what she suggest there is that we should be mindful of the data that speaks most resonantly to us, and not just be very cognitive in our – in our deliberation or categorization of research. we should say, “Well look, out of the say for example, 20 participants that I engaged with, eight of them talked about this one particular thing, so that’s the thing that I should represent and re-present in my dissemination and my communication of this.” She asks us instead to think more embodiedly about research and say what the research that speaks to you, what is meaningful to you, what excites you, what interests you in this? And so I went back to all of that data, and decided that I would chose the moments of communication within those original narratives that I excavated. The ones that were most meaningful to me, the ones that made me gasp, the ones that made me cry, the ones that made me happy or joyful, and so I took those moments. And look, those moments were the moments interestingly that were generally shared, so they were stories that were generally experienced by other women academics. So some of those examples are – there was a woman who was telling me about how she entered academia as a casual academic, and it was because her daughter at the age of 30 was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and she sat for many, many months next to her daughter in her hospital bed, and her daughter ended up – her daughter died as a result of the tumor, and she couldn’t face going back to her previous employment and she didn’t want to go back to full time work, and she didn’t want to go back to the way she had been and the way she had lived before. So for her academia was a new way into a new life, because her life was irrecoverably changed from the moment her daughter passed. So that story you see, wouldn’t find itself in a code – in a traditional kind of coding process. Does that make sense? But it resonates, and it’s part of her lived experience that I thought was an important story. Another woman told me of an instant where she had been working alongside another woman casual academic for a number of years, they taught into the same module at the same course over years, and one semester she came back to teach and she said, “Oh. Where’s Carol?” Not teaching this semester. And the course convener, or course coordinator – we talk about that role with different languages across different states, and said, “Oh. Carol – Carol died. Did you not know? She had breast cancer when she died.” And nobody had thought to tell the sessional colleagues or the casual colleagues with who that woman had been working with. Then there are stories of one woman who would make an appointment with her head of school every year to see if there was a possibility for her to either have more on-going contracts, or a permanent position. Every single year a day or two out from that appointment it would be cancelled – she would literally be stood up. Uh so I merged these two forms, if you like, of gathering and creating data segments. I merged Gee’s holistic process there, where I was interested in not just the words, but the picture, the pace, the tone, the delivery of those words, the gestural content within those words. In other words, you can understand what the intent and the experience of those words much more through the way in which they’re communicated. I merged that with this excavation and re-using of data that glowed to me, uh and out of those two process, I re-storied the drama. So I literally took and created a different order – a different running order from the way those stories had necessarily been presented to me to start, and I create interactive and dialogue between the women, and I wrote it as a drama script, and then I directed that as a drama script. And obviously, because we’re dealing with personal experience, I share that drama script with all of the participants before I presented it publicly and made sure that people weren’t’ necessarily identifiable, or that I had misunderstood the context or the meaning through which they had shared their stories. Um so once I had shared that – that script with the participants and everybody was very happy for me to uh – go through to rehearsal with that, I then cast the drama, and directed the drama, and then we presented that drama to a number of research conferences, etcetera. So that’s the re-storying process, you see, it’s – it’s much more time consuming. If we’re going to talk about challenges again, one of the challenges of arts informed inquiry is that it requires you to have a background in an artistic form or creative expertise, and it also requires of you quite a substantial amount of time – that it takes much more time to re-tory in a way, and to produce a piece of drama that it would perhaps to do a straight forward data analysis and writing that analysis after the paper.

**KL:** That is a phenomenal example, Gail. Thank you so much for sharing that. Gail, I want to thank you so much for coming on the show, sharing your experience with arts informed research, as well as some examples from your own work. This has been really wonderful.

**GC:** Thank you so much. And I also invite anybody that’s listening that has any questions around this or would like to know more about it, please – please feel free to be in touch with me, because I think we all recognize that um – we love our research, don’t we? And we would love to know that it’s having an impact, and we’d love to be able to share it and inspire the people to work in the ways that we work.

**KL:** Excellent. Well, we will definitely put information about contacting you in the show note, along with many citations to some of the things that you’ve talked with us about today. Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

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

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode 141 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Gail Crimmins discusses some of the benefits of arts-informed research. Take a listen:

Gail, can you share some of the benefits of arts informed research that you’ve found throughout your work?

**GC:** Yes. Um accessibility, evocation, and engagement. I share Patricia Leavy’s position when she claims that most academic research is total inaccessible, as it’ loaded with jargon and prohibitive language so that people don’t want to read the stuff and neither can they, you know? As a result, the average peer reviewed article has an audience of between three and eight readers, which is astounding when you consider the human and other resources that have been put into that research. For me, I think of the nurses, the cleaners, the hospitality staff, the teachers who have payed taxes to fund academic research. Research should be acceptable to then and their lives. Also, most of the people who are kind of subject of academic study or who might benefit from a particular academic study, don’t share the codes of communication that are predominately used in research disseminations, so – so that benefit to them is not always obvious, they can’t always access that research. And the [*indiscernible*] are really the specialists, you know – they use – most academics use very technical terms and that really estranges people from the research to which they have contributed, even if it’s only through their taxes, or maybe even more as being participants in that research. Um so for me that’s ethically problematic, and I think the arts – whether that be theater, photography, film, fine art, painting, poetry – they can help make academic research accessible. And so that’s a really important benefit I think to this form of research. Another significant benefit is its capacity to engage audiences’ empathy into motion. Most research tells a story – you know, whether it’s a story between the relationship of young children who play in the rainforests regularly up until the age of eight, and how that impacts on the way that they support or advocate for environmental sustainability in their later years. You know, whatever that research is, it tells a story - um and so I think that there is a capacity for arts informed research to engage that story, if you like, um – in a way that traditional methods don’t. So all research tells the story, and it all therefore has the ability to stimulate us or to engage us aesthetically, and to open our senses. And by the way, I teach into creativity and one of the things that I do when we start a course on creativity is I ask the students to define or explain what creativity is to them, or what aesthetic is. What is aesthetic? What does it mean? And I explain that aesthetic is that which is the opposite on anesthetic, and anesthetics designed to dull the senses, where as anything aesthetic, you know – is designed to stimulate the senses. So I think that’s another capacity of arts-informed research, is to really engage us aesthetic – to engage our senses. So we share that aesthetic and evocative quality that I think lends itself seamlessly to artistic representation. So stories that are represented within artistic forms can both present and evoke a fully embodied experience.

**KL:** Thanks so much for sharing some of the benefits of arts informed research, Gail.

**GC:** You’re welcome. Thanks very much.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 141 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Gail Crimmins discussing some of the benefits of arts-informed research. Thanks for listening!