Episode 150: Bethany Simunich

# KL: Katie Linder

**BS:** Bethany Simunich

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

# [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 this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Bethany Simunich, which the director of online pedagogy and research at Kent State University. She has many years of experience as both a face-to-face and online instructor and has also held positions in educational technology instructional design and faculty development aligning with her interest in quality assurance in online education. Bethany has worked with quality matters for many years including as a senior research colleague Master reviewer and workshop facilitator. And also serves on the quality matters academic advisory Council currently, she is co-state lead for the QM Ohio Consortium as well as a QMC and Course Review manager for Kent State. Bethany enjoys presenting workshops and seminars at universities and conferences on instructional design online teaching and conducting distance learning focused research. Her professional and research interests include presence in the online classroom peer evaluation of online teaching and design and online student and instructor satisfaction and self-efficacy.

Bethany, thank you so much for taking the time to join me on the show today.

**BS:** Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

**KL:** So as a fellow online learning researcher, I'm really excited to dive into some of the work that you're currently doing. But first what led you to research online learning in the first place.

**BS:** Well, I probably I was led to research online learning because like a lot of Faculty I was thrust into online teaching and I was not happy about it at first so I was a face-to-face instructor and I was then asked to teach online and I kind of felt like a duck out of water, you know, so over the years many faculty have told me that they felt or still feel the same so I began teaching online and you know, it was shortly after that that I realized that the teaching strategies and methods that I use face-to-face. They weren't always applicable to the online classroom. So I felt like I wasn't connecting with my students in the same way. I wasn't engaging with them in the same way and I felt like learning wasn't happening in the same way. So I also realized that. How I designed and I'm putting that in air quotes, which you can't see but how I designed my face-to-face courses was really not applicable to how I needed to design my online courses.

So I had really not spent a lot of time in designing courses when I talk face-to-face. So, you know, all of this really led me to a career shift. So about a decade ago, I made this career shift and left my former field which was communication to focus exclusively on online learning and that really was what began my new research agenda. So at the time I was really interested in learning more about how both instructors and students can be successful and satisfied in the online classroom.

I think initially I started to research it because I had such a joy of teaching, you know, not to be trite but a joy of teaching face-to-face initially when I moved into online teaching I lost that and I really wanted a way to find that and to reclaim it so you. The first order of business for me was really reading the research and online learning and really educating myself about how to be an Effective online teacher.

**KL:** So Bethany clearly you have kind of changed your ideas about online learning you really believe in it now. I'm curious what was some of the things that you came across? Or what was part of your experience that helped, the shift, for you to get into a place where you felt a lot more comfortable and where you really felt like there was learning happening in those spaces?

**BS:** Yeah, well, I think initially the thing that I miss the most was, you know, of course online. We can't see our students, right? So face-to-face, we would have these discussions and they would happen in in real time and you could see the faces of your students especially when they were confused and you needed to you know, give some more information or go back and offer an additional explanation. And so when I moved online and that was gone, I really didn't know how to connect with my students to know how that they how they were doing and to really have a good dialogue with them.

So I think really two things that I learned very quickly what were really important, one is that you have to get to know your students in a different way, you have to engage with them a different way and have that dialogue in a different way. So over 90% of what we communicate is not enacted through the words that we speak. It's through the tone and the body language and all those things that initially I was missing online. So, I started to include different types of learning activities and assessments in my courses, like reflective journals, for example, that really helped me to get to know my students.

I started including more practice learning activities so that I knew before that big assessment whether or not they were quote unquote getting it. So things like that really helped me to connect with my students and to develop that Rapport that I felt that I had face-to-face, but initially I didn't have online and really what I feel. Now is I know my online students better than I ever did my face-to-face students believe it or not.

**KL:** Wow, okay, so I'm really curious, you know, you are kind of experimenting in this space. What are some of the key research questions that you started to explore as you were starting to shift track in terms of your research focus?

**BS:** I think initially I was just exploring what works online and I think many of us come to online teaching and learning in that place of what works, because you know, when we try to do this direct transfer of what works face-to-face to online, it doesn't work right? One of the key points there was discussions. So when I moved online, I initially did that very traditional type of approach where I took my face to face discussion, and I moved it online except you can't really do that because face-to-face, I may ask a question in class and I'm going to maybe take three answers from three different students and that's going to become a jumping off point. It's going to you know, create a dialogue that's going to you know, go where those answers take us. But if you take that same question, which usually only has one or two, you know, right answers and you move it online you really take in a short answer essay question, but then you're asking everybody to reply to it and often times. We're asking everybody to have a different answer so face-to-face, we don't do this. We don't go around the room and say okay we're going to go around and everybody have a unique answer to this question. And then we're going to go back around and you have to have a reply but you can't just say I agree or disagree. So we move it online, we really have to think about what is our pedagogical goal behind that assignment because sometimes those face-to-face discussions do not become good online discussions, they become good short answer essay questions, or they become a journal response or even a blog post where somebody doesn't have to respond. So I think initially I really was just diving into those things that work differently online from the face-to-face classroom. Moving forward though, I think mostly I'd love to really start to explore research questions that investigate engagement and satisfaction and learning from both the instructor and the learner perspective.

So, you know, as a facet of that also questions that attempt to find that quote unquote sweet spot or balance in terms of workload. So for example one phrase that I often tell faculty is don't design a course, you can't teach and what I mean by that is we can design robust rigorous highly engaging online courses that will likely result in greater student engagement and greater learning but often at the cost of instructor burnout, right? So when I'm working with faculty to design courses, you know, I even use this tactic with them where we put assignment due dates on a calendar and we you know kind of backup so they know when they have to give announcement reminder maybe before that, but they also put down on that calendar when I need to have feedback to their students so that their students can utilize that feedback to improve their performance and if I'm looking at a course where an instructor has to return 60, you know, 10-page research papers in four days, that's really not going to work. You know, it may work at the cost of that instructor giving up sleeping or eating or other, you know important things in their life.

When I look at things like that I also look at the fact that we have to respect who are learners are and where they are. So for example, when we're designing fully online graduate programs, I'd love to explore how we can really design for this fact that our Learners are often working professionals with limited time and they are most interested in authentic assessments, but they may be less inclined for example to read Foundation articles or text right? So they're going to do that triage, often times, on that instructional material.

So in some ways then, you know our job as an instructor really becomes to hone in on alignment making sure that we're giving them key pieces but to focus their time on that application. So sometimes I think the best courses are designed for both instructors and students to focus their time wisely and then also respect that time that's needed for understanding and integration and reflection, you know, so having said all that I guess at the heart of what I'd like to explore is the meaning and an action of what we mean by rigor. And then also how we operate operationalized learning, because it's not just grades, you know, when I read online learning research and you know most often, you know, we're looking at how does this impact student learning and were operationalizing that by looking at final grades or individual grades on coursework? But is that really how we measure learning? Is that really, you know, the robust meaning behind the learning that we want to see so the these are bigger questions, but definitely something I'd love to have the time to explore in the future.

**KL:** So Bethany, I would imagine that as you're working with faculty in you know, each term to design these courses and with the other roles that you play with in kind of distance education more broadly as an administrator. You have some ideas about gaps of certain things you're seeing in online learning research things you wish we had more research on what are some of those things that you kind of, you know, maybe you can't conduct the research yourself, but you're like, I wish we had this I wish we could answer this particular question.

**BS:** Okay, I'm going to go into that in two ways. First, I'm going to you know, give the answer of some of the gaps that I wish I just had this answer when I was talking to faculty administrators. One of them is a lot more good research on engaging instructional materials. So, you know, for example if we're looking at narrated presentations or quote unquote online lectures, however, you want to term them. What is most engaging to students and really looking at that interplay between the visuals and the images that we use how what we're saying, you know reinforces that. A really good appropriate length and maybe even things about our tone of voice and whatnot. And really making sure that that's followed up by some sort of, you know, knowledge check or something and making sure it aligns to you know assignments. I think that's a big question. Now the second way that I'm going to answer that is, really not a gap in the true sense, but something that I find most puzzling about online learning research sometimes, is that researchers from other disciplines often approached online learning research without really diving into the history of the field and also oftentimes without collaborating with other online learning experts and researchers.

So sometimes it's an article, you know that I read about online learning in a discipline specific journal, or maybe it's a presentation at a deal Focus conference, but I see some really great research questions that are ending with conclusions that aren't fully examined and that does actually leave a gap for online learning. I think that this matters even more because this information is most often being disseminated to practitioners to online teachers and they're taking this research at face value and they're taking it back to their online classrooms into their students. So, you know just as an example, I attended a presentation a few years ago. There was a good research project and the researchers had had surveyed students hundreds of students across dozens of courses at this institution and among the many conclusions that they came away with one of them was that online students did not like interaction. So I kind of followed up with them about this and really interaction was never operationalized, there was really no attempt to examine how learner interaction even happened in the courses that they looked at or didn't happen. So, whether it was even included or not or even looking at things at whether or not it was, you know students were. Engaging in poorly designed discussions or if the students were given clear information for how to interact and how that interaction will be evaluated. So all of these things could actually really influence satisfaction levels in terms of students and interaction. But there were faculty that came away from that presentation thinking online students don't like interactions, so I should not include it in my course.

So things like that really give me pause because I almost feel as though sometimes we have a greater responsibility is online learning researchers because we are we're giving this information directly to online instructors and instructional designers. You know that work in the field. I also remembered article that concluded that Learners prefer webcam videos to PowerPoints for online lectures, and we actually have research that contradicts that but this this particular article looked at, it compared this recording of a really Dynamic engaging Professor, so we all know the type we could just sit there and listen, right and the comparison then was made to a PowerPoint which was very traditional white background, you know, text heavy, bullet points, black text, type of PowerPoint, and it was read in a rather boring way button by an un-engaging professor and the conclusion there is students prefer webcam videos. So I mean, I really do think of this as a gap because it's more pervasive than we sometimes thinking online learning and it really is missing or insufficient information that I think limits our ability to make these good research based decisions moving forward.

**KL:** So Bethany, I think you raise a really good point here, which is a lot of the research and online learning is meant to be very actionable. This is something we pay a lot of attention to here in the Research Unit at Ecampus that I direct because the idea is that people will take you know, the data that you're collecting and the results that you come up with and make changes based on that and some research obviously falls into that category, but other research is meant to be more theoretical or to be built on in different ways. And I think you've really pointed out an important piece here that there was a responsibility to help people to kind of implement that research in a way that would be useful for student learning.

**BS:** Yes, Yeah, That's a good point.

**KL:** Okay Bethany. This is opened up so many good ideas. We're going to take a brief break when we come back. We'll hear a little bit more from Bethany about research versus assessment in the field of online learning research back in a moment.

As many of you know, I work as the research director at Oregon State Ecampus, which produces the “Research in Action” podcast. I'm excited to share with you that Ecampus is ranked number three in the nation according to U.S. News and World Report in the category of best online Bachelor’s programs. This is the fifth straight year, Oregon State Ecampus has been ranked in the top 10 and it's our highest ranking yet, which is a testament to how Oregon State provides students worldwide with access to innovative learning experience to help them advance their careers and improve their lives. You can learn more by visiting ecampus.oregonstate.edu.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Bethany one of the kind of interesting things I think about education research and online education research is there is such a connection between research and assessment and the kind of assessment and evaluation work that we would do in those contexts. I'm curious what you see is the relationship between research and assessment in online educational contexts.

**BS:** Oh, that's a good question. You know there is some overlap but I think there's also some really important differences mostly in terms of data and use of data and then also our goals so for example research and educational context, you know, we may have this goal of hypothesis, testing or discovering and documenting new information and knowledge. However, when we look at it from the assessment lens that most often focuses I think on evaluation so whether it's at the course level. What a program level or the institutional level. I think another major difference is also in the methodology. So research especially experimental research, you know. Obviously, we're manipulating a variable most often order to investigate our research question or to test a hypothesis, but assessment on the other hand most often examines existing data and then looks at that data in relation to certain metrics are benchmarks. So I think you know in its most simple form. It's kind of a difference between statistics and data if that makes sense.

**KL:** So I'm really curious what you think this relationship how it impacts the potential for online education research because there is so much that we can learn from assessment data that may be kind of already collected but I think sometimes we ask different kinds of questions when we come from a research perspective. So how does that relationship impact how you think about online education research?

**BS:** Yeah, you know on one hand, I think that these important distinctions between research and assessment are too often lost and you know, as you mentioned we may not always be bringing our research know how to these assessment initiatives and I think in in many ways then that that it doesn't help our assessment initiatives to do that. So I see you in here a lot of Institutions for example collecting data for assessment purposes, but, inadvertently, they're treating that data like statistics without really conducting any analysis on them. So for example, let's say that we have an online program and that it's just undergone that major revision to the design of their courses, and the institutions hope was that we're going to redesign these courses and it's going to be a higher quality program. And so they're hoping that that higher quality program is going to actually increase program complete. Okay, so you redesign these courses may look at program completion data. Let's say for two years after their revision and they're expecting to see this increase, but they don't if we forget that that data is just numbers. I think that we can miss that meaning so we could be assuming that the program actually did not set goals and it's of lower quality after revision. But is that true? We're not looking at the full picture and if we're not also gathering for example student feedback. Instructor feedback, you know things such as that we might also miss a fact that maybe what's going on is we created a higher quality more rigorous program, but we fail to prepare learners to succeed in this newly revised program or we didn't adequately prepare instructors to be really effective teachers in this new online program. So we may have, in fact caused grades to initially lower or both students and instructors to be less satisfied, even though students are actually learning more and those that do complete the program or leaving better prepared for employment.

So I think sometimes when we when we. You know use that assessment lens, we really get this superficial and sometimes myopic look at the data and we're not looking at the interpretation the meaning behind the number. So I really do think it's important that we bring our knowledge of good scholarly research when we're doing assessment because this potential to do assessment well lies in this accurate and meaningful interpretation of the data. It's I think it's so important to begin this process. You know by asking those basic research questions, like what do we want to know? What do we already know? And also I think maybe even more importantly, what are some things that might influence the data that we are collecting?

**KL:** So I'm curious from kind of thinking about it. The other angle of what is assessment bring to the research context, you know, like we know that we can infuse assessment with research. What does it mean to infuse research with an assessment lens in your opinion?

**BS**: Oh, that's a very interesting question. I think right now I'm so embedded in the perspective of using data and learning analytics especially for good research that I probably haven't thought enough about how it can work in reverse and really what kind of assessment brings to research. I've just had two conversations recently about using LMS data specifically and how we can use that in order to improve design and improve grades.

So both of the questions oddly enough for focused on time spent in courses and students interacting with the online content in those courses. So although it's dependent on the LMS, most often what LMS data gives us for example is students logging into a course or accessing a piece of content, but you don't know after that point how they're engaging with that material or even if they're engaging with that material. It could just be for example their computer’s still making that connection and yet in both of these recent discussions, I've had institutions were taking this data to actually make design revision decisions. So students, you know did or did not access this piece of content or accessed it for this length of time and therefore, you know, if we revise this course we should, you know, make these data-driven quote unquote decisions based on this content. And so the discussions really were around how that actually, you know might be an erroneous assumption in that case and really thinking about what are the learning analytics that we're pulling from our Learning Management Systems in order to make data-driven decisions.

So I really think about you know, how we can use that data wisely when I did think about how can we potentially use this type of data for research? I think we can at least, use some of that data to make course design revision changes, but I think we really have to think about what are the limits of that data in terms of what it is telling us and I think also it's really important to augment that with student feedback to really get a full robust picture of what we want to know.

**KL:** Based on what you're saying, it kind of occurs to me that maybe assessment leads to research questions, you know, like it's kind of a foundation.

**BS:** Yeah I think too often, it doesn't, I guess where I'm at right now, but I think ideally it does.

**KL:** So I also am kind of wondering if the assessment lens I'm just kind of, popping with ideas as you’re talking about this Bethany, and I think partially because we're coming out of the same research field, is I think sometimes when we're thinking about engaging faculty also in questions of online teaching and learning research, assessment is a good starting point for them, especially if they've never conducted research on teaching or education before because there is such an overlap sometimes between how we may kind of collect data or how we might approach a certain problem or issue or even some of the challenges of assessment and doing it within context and the same, you know goes for research as well. Have you seen that as being a useful way to engage faculty in this research is to kind of say well you've done this before it might have looked a little bit different from an assessment lens, but you can kind of Leverage that knowledge to engage in different kinds of research projects.

**BS:** That's a really good point. And I think very valid. I think for most faculty, you're right that that really is a great segue into doing what is essentially online learning research. But, you know using the opportunity of you're already doing, you know some assessment on what's going on in your courses, I think most often, I tend to think of it more as using SoTL research, or scholarship of teaching and learning research, as a segue into that because I think that it's a more robust research approach than then simply assessment. And sometimes that is something that really gets that conversation started between, you know, faculty and IDs or faculty and online learning researchers because I think in general, you know, a lot of faculty are kind of, you know, even in the ad hoc, way collecting data on their courses and what's working and what's not.

They're just not really doing it in a systematic structured way that that would allow them to you know to really, you know, call it research and conduct research and get some answers that are more broadly applicable beyond their own course. So I think that that's a really important thing to consider that sometimes that conversation about assessment which is you know, a continuous and ubiquitous conversation higher education. Sometimes that is the start of a really good conversation for you know, how can this really become a good research project?

**KL:** So I'm curious to Bethany you mentioned IDs or instructional designers. What kind of role are they playing in this? We talked a little bit about the faculty and engaging them in this research. To what degree are you working with instructional designers to kind of leverage their expertise being in between sometimes faculty and students in that design role to think about research questions?

**BS:** Okay, that's a good question, you know having been both an instructional designer and a supervisor for team of instructional designers. I truly feel that IDs are some of the most knowledgeable educated and valuable members of any online learning team. So as you know as much as possible, I'm trying to you know to bring them into this the stage where they can really collaborate with faculty that they're already working with and engage in online learning research. So, you know in some ways I think a really good start to that is having IDs engage with online learning research, right?

So just in the way that many of us do when we start online teaching looking at the literature that's out there and really trying to do, you know, trace it back and even do brief lit reviews for topics and questions that faculty ask them often. So things like, you know, why we should create online presentations for online courses that aren't like. Or what types of things should I include in my grading criteria for online discussions or what is the benefit of including reflective activities like journals and online courses. So I think the more that IDs really have a knowledge about online learning research the better they're able to actually do their job and really partner up with faculty when they're designing these good online courses, but it's also I think the start of their own research Journey, so I do a lot of staff and professional developments trying to help instructional designers who maybe did not come from a program where they had a research methods course for example, but to really get those research Basics because IDs have that knowledge and if they, you know, really can kind of bring up some of that that confidence in the area of research I think that they would make fantastic partners for faculty who want to engage in this type of research. But your unit the Ecampus Research Unit, you had recently completed a study if I remember correctly on IDs and their interest in doing research.

**KL:** Yeah, we did and this is something I can link to in the show notes. It was a very interesting topic for us. We were very curious just about how instructional designers were engaging in research currently and what were their needs when it came to professional development with research, kind of like you're saying some folks had just come out of programs and it didn't really talk about research, or where where they hadn't had a chance to do kind of hands-on projects. And so they were feeling a little bit lacking in confidence at least in the participants that we had in our study.

**BS:** Yeah, so I mean I think for those of us that are that are in online learning and have that research background and interest, I think that you know, we share the responsibility for helping our IDs who want to learn more about research and want to conduct research to be able to do that. So I know that there's some good workshops and courses out there. I conduct one for Quality Matters for instructional designers. I know that you know, you do a lot of your institution as well, but I think IDs are just a powerhouse of knowledge and you know the more that they are interested in collaborating on Research, I think the better, I think it's going to result in in better online learning research.

**KL:** I could not agree more Bethany. So I'm curious as we're kind of wrapping up here, what is next for you in your research pipeline? What are you hoping to tackle next?

**BS:** Well right now I'm actually working on a research project with quality matters that examines how institutions are implementing quality assurance processes and along with that utilizing QA metrics and data. So, I had a good fortune to work with QM’s director of research, Dr. K Shattuck, for a few years now and while this current research project is utilizing this really good framework that was developed by Kim's executive director Devin Dare. I've also started thinking about it through the lens of implementation science.

So I'm final technically working on a project and I've been talking with many of our faculty from Ken State's education college now that's really about implementation science, especially in K through 12. This is a brand-new lens for me. So this has really led me to this to a lot of great work by norm for example, and it's one of those times and places where multiple projects I'm working on have collided in a good way, I guess so, you know broadly and specifically right now. I'm really looking at how are we implementing some of these, you know quality assurance standards and metrics and processes and really how does that differ by institutional context? The end goal of mine personally there is really to be able to give some good recommendations where you know, whether you’re an instructional designer in a college or you’re you know, one of those faculty leaders or your administrator at your institution, starting where you are, Taking stock of what you have and saying, you know, these are our goals, This is this is one pathway, This is one way that we can move forward in order to meet those goals, because it looks very different depending on that context.

So, you know, you may have a very strong faculty Senate you may be unionized you may be staffed by a lot of adjuncts. You may have no instructional designers at your institution, you may have 20 instructional designers, and all those things I think are going to really influence how you're able to create an implementation. Quality assurance processes for all my learning.

**KL:** Well, Bethany, I cannot wait to see the results of this research, and I do want to point out to our listeners, We did have K Shattuck on the show, so I will link to her episode in the show notes for people who want to circle back learn a little bit more about quality matters, but Bethany, thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and talk a little bit about your research with online learning.

**BS:** This has been really fun. Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. And this was a great conversation. Thank you Katie.

**KL:** And 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.

# 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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