Episode 162: Lauren Remenick

# KL: Katie Linder

**LR:** Lauren Remenick

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and sixty-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’m joined by Lauren Remenick, a doctoral candidate and research assistant in the higher education and policies study program at the University of Central Florida. In addition to her current research on textbook and academic authors with Dr. Cathleen P. King, Lauren’s research interests include adult learning and non-traditional students in higher education. Lauren received her master’s degree in forest ecosystems and society from Oregon State University and bachelor’s degree in environmental studies and psychology Elon University.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today Lauren.

**LR:** Oh thank you, I’m so glad to be here.

**KL:** So I’m really excited to dive into some of your research on authors’ experiences. This is a personal interest area of mine, of course, as a writer. Can you share a little bit about your research on academic authors’ experiences with writing and publishing?

**LR:** Yeah, so the organization that we worked with for this study is the Textbook and Academic Authors Association or TAA. And TAA has about 2,000 members that come from academia and industry and are both published and unpublished. And so TAA is the only association that specifically serves both textbook and academic authors. So they provide newsletters, webinars, and workshops, events, and networking for authors and those who want to be authors.

And so TAA serves as a resource for authors throughout their writing careers and in their work with publishers. And as I found authors need help with publishers because there's a lot to navigate in the world of publishing even Anne Lamott in her writing book *Bird by Bird* says that, “it's great to be a published author, but you really have to do it for a love of writing because the publishing aspect is just a beast in itself.” So there's kind of two worlds that were looking at here that authors have to straddle and that's the world of publishing and the world of writing.

So in the publishing world publishers know that the price of textbooks is a hot issue these days students upset about the prices and universities trying to lower the cost of books for their students so Cengage put forth a new at Netflix-style model of renting and buying textbooks, which they call Cengage unlimited and that provides an unlimited number of books and online materials for a set price per semester.

And last time I looked it was a hundred twenty dollars a semester for access to all their ebooks ancillary materials and digital learning platforms as well as book rentals for about eight dollars with free shipping and that just rolled out late last year. So it'll be interesting to see what reception they get from that.

And there's been a trend in Publisher mergers in recent years and I just saw that Cengage and McGraw-Hill are planning to merge. So that Pearson will be there single largest competitor now, so it'll be interesting to see where Cengage unlimited fits with that merger, especially since there have been some lawsuits by authors stating that their contracts are violated as part of the Netflix style model.

So what we wanted to know is how do authors fit in the publishing world and how are they affected by these changes? And then in the world of writing most people think about writing as having an idea sitting down and putting that idea on paper and it may be that includes writer's block or some hesitation along the way so there's numerous books on behavioral management strategies to improve the process of writing.

So how to write well and effectively how to organize yourself and your time how to hold yourself accountable and write every day and so on. And a great example of that is Dr. Tara Gray's book, *Publish & Flourish*, which she spoke about on episode 18 of the “Research in Action” podcast.

**KL:** And that will link to it in the show notes in case anybody wants to revisit that.

**LR:** Oh great and those books are incredibly useful. They not only serve a wide breadth of writers, but they can be used for any topic or any style of writing and the lessons are timeless. But what they don't do is explore the emotional journey of writing. So we wanted to know how a published author is deal with and navigate the writing process holistically. So what methods challenges supports successes and emotions go into the writing and Publishing process and how or if those experiences Foster the development of an authorship identity.

**KL:** So I love this idea Lauren of separating out the publishing side and the writing side like that just seems so important in terms of really looking at those things from different angles.

**LR:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Kl:** So I'm curious what led to your interest in this topic?

**LR:** So this study it was in collaboration with Dr. Kathleen P. King, who's my advisor in my doctoral program, and she has authored 32 academic books and is on the Textbook and Academic Authors Council of Fellows, and I know that when she found TAA, she was overjoyed to finally have found her people who understand what academic writing textbooks is about.

So she's been through her own writing and publishing journey throughout her academic career, and she was interested to learn about other authors experiences. And then as for me, I just love reading and writing and one of the authors I spoke with said something about, “words on a page just turns you on,” and that really resonated with me.

I've always wanted to write a book. And so I approached this study from the mindset of tell me your story: How did you become an author? What was that process like? I wanted to learn everything I could from them for both the research and my own personal interest and the authors really gave us rich insightful details about their writing and Publishing Journey quite similar actually to episode 140, with Dr. James Lang, where he spoke about his experience in editing and writing books.

I heard him provide quite similar insights to the authors that I interviewed and so I had 12 interviews which were about an hour each and many of those authors had never talked about their writing and publishing experience before so I was really grateful for their open honesty their insight and for allowing me to view the role that authorship plays in their lives.

**KL:** So, Lauren, a lot of our listeners like to deep dive on research methods and design so I'm curious if you can talk about the strategies that you use to code the interview data that you collected. Did you come in with predetermined codes where you developing them? As you went along? Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

**LR:** Yeah, absolutely. So I developed the codes as I went along and I did it all by hand. I printed out our four research questions and I tape those questions on my wall and then I gave each one a different color. So pink orange green and blue which were just the highlighters that I had on hand at the time and then I printed all the transcripts and I highlighted any section of the transcript that answered one of our research questions.

And after I went through the transcripts I double-checked my work by reviewing each color to make sure it fit the research question and I change colors if need be which actually happened quite a lot and then I went through all the transcripts color by color and I gave each highlighted section a code name in which came from the author's own words and then I groups the codes into categories and then larger themes and I used constant comparison throughout the process in which I was constantly questioning where those codes best fit and I moved them around until dr. King and I felt certain that they had a good. And I have to say I'm primarily a quantitative researcher.

So qualitative research is always somewhat of a challenge for me, but I do respect the process and I really appreciate the author's voices. I just love hearing their stories and learning about the work they've done so I always try to use their words as much as possible in my analysis to let them speak their truth.

**KL:** So I'm curious, Lauren, because you mentioned your quantitative person and you were doing more qualitative work here now, did you approach learning this new methodology? I mean is this something that you were getting kind of some mentorship on from Dr. King? Is this something that you were kind of doing reading around to try to figure out how to do this kind of coding? How did you approach learning that that new piece of the research methodology?

**LR:** Yes, so all of the above in my master's program, I did mixed methods research. And so that served as a foundation for understanding qualitative research and kind of introducing me to qualitative analysis. And then of course, I took a course on qualitative analysis and my doctoral program which helped.

Dr. King gave me some great books and she worked with me on the analysis and we compared our responses and and then I just searched for some information myself. So, like, Dr. Janet Salmons has some really good books out there on doing qualitative research and I just kind of kept digging until I found what I needed and I felt like I had a good sense of what the authors were saying on hand.

**KL:** Well, Janet has also come on the show, so we will link to her episode as well. And I know one of my favorite coding books is also by Saldaña, which we can link to in the show notes also for people who are looking for a little bit more information on qualitative coding because you're right; there are so many fantastic resources that are out there for people to take a look at.

Okay, Lauren, I'm excited to dive into some of the results of this research with you. We're going to take a brief break when we come back. We'll hear a little bit more from Lauren about barriers and supports for academic authors. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Lauren, I want to dive in to some of the results that you have found from researching authors experiences and particularly. I know you focused on some of the barriers and supports for academic authors in your research. What did you learn about the most common barriers or challenges that academic authors are facing?

**LR:** So we saw a lot of different things, but they were kind of able to be grouped into three main challenges for authors. So we had the publishing process the writing process and the isolation that comes from writing and publishing.

So first, within the publishing process, the main issue there was the business and culture of publishing for authors it was just a whole new world for them to learn they had to learn the jargon the culture. The do's and don'ts and a lot of them learn just by making mistakes, especially if they didn't have a mentor to answer their questions along the way and a lot of it was having little say over what happened to their book in the publishing process many of the authors thought that they would have complete control over their book, but that's just not what happened instead authors felt that they had a little control over for example, the marketing and cover design or the textbook price one author told me that in 1978 his book was sold for $7.30, which I looked up and adjusted for inflation that would be about $28.50 today. But it now sells for $260 it with some of the ancillary’s and so he said, “I don't even use my book in the classroom because it's just too expensive; it's ridiculous.”

And so that really shows me how he didn't have control over his book price and he felt that it was unfair to his students which was upsetting to him. And then some authors really hated the cover design of their book and they just had to learn to choose their battles. They had to figure out when to stand up for themselves and when to kind of butt into the process and be a little more large and in charge than they would normally be but this is me difficult when the publishers were bought out sometimes three or four times the authors felt that was a trend which negatively impact them in their work and because of this they also revolving door of editors which led them to fill out there was no institutional memory of their work. So one author said, “I don't know how many editors I went through because they kept leaving and I have to start over with somebody new who had an entirely different View for the book than I did.” And so we can see from this how publisher mergers and changes in the world of publishing really affect authors and their work.

**KL:** That is really fascinating. But yeah, this is something too because I've worked with various Publishers for work that we do here in the Research Unit and also for my own work and I think you're absolutely right. Like you just kind of learn as you go and if you we kind of assume this is kind of tacit knowledge, but it's absolutely not so this is really fascinating.

**LR:** Yeah, it's not at all.

 **KL:** Okay. So what else did you learn about these common barriers or challenges?

**LR:** So another thing Dr. Lang spoke about in the episode that you spoke with him was in receiving feedback from reviewers. And I think that's difficult for everyone because writing is such a personal act that critique of your writing can feel like a critique of yourself and so authors had to figure out how to deal with feedback that felt harsh or bad or confusing without internalizing that criticism and some authors were surprised to find that their reviewers who are in the same field as them really didn't do a very good job of reviewing.

For instance, one author said that he was told that some information his book was and so he spent days trying to figure out the issue only to find that he was in fact, correct, but the information was so new that the reviewer just hadn't read the latest research.

**KL:** Oh, that’s interesting.

**LR:** Yeah, so authors had to figure out how to respond politely when they reviewers said something wrong, but they also often realize that when a reviewer said something that don't make sense to them that was a clue that their wording perhaps wasn't as clear as it could be and so they learn to go back and perhaps reword something or move some sentences around so that their writing was clear to anyone who read their work. And so that was a challenge in the publishing process, but certainly a skill that they had to learn.

And and then the second main challenge was the writing process. So authors encounter challenges with the amount of effort and the time it takes to write a book working with co-authors and managing their book on top of their competing responsibilities. So we heard authors say over and over again how much how the book was so much more time intensive than they expected and that the work was never really done.

When out there said I almost literally haven't taken a break and 14 years because the thing is you're never really done you finish a chapter and you start on the next chapter. Then you start revising a chapter for the 48th time that you just revised it and so you're never done and some others came to realize after a while of working on the book that if it was a successful book, they would never truly finish it because it would always need revisions in new additions new Ancillary materials are online content and at the contract stays with you for life, so that contract is really important to get right the first time.

So many others had regrets over time in regards to their contract and after much footage after much frustration, they finally found a lawyer to help them either adjust their contract or if they couldn't adjust their contract to learn how to create a better contract for their next book because many of them just didn't realize how important that contract was when they first signed it one author told me that of the 30 million words. He'd written over the last 42 years. He didn't own a single one of them and couldn't even use them in his class without getting permission. So he said, “my publisher owns me and every word that I've written.” And so the trouble here is that authors know a lot about their field of study and a lot about writing but they don't really know what a contract should look like or how to negotiate with the publisher to get a better contract.

One author told me that it took her a year just to agree to a contract and the thing is that authors don't know how successful their book is going to be so to hire a lawyer is useful in the long run if it's a successful book, but it's a lot of money up front. So they're really taking a gamble on their potential success and that's certainly a challenge and then the contract also states who they work with on the book.

So some authors struggled with co-authors. If they didn't complete the group the agreed-upon work if they had a certain personality that they didn't get along with or if they had a very different writing style because then they had to integrate the two writing styles into one cohesive voice and one author that I spoke with struggled with her co-author for 12 years to the point that it was affecting her well-being, but he was in the original contract. And so there wasn't much she could do. So her advice of course was to make sure you know your co-authors well before you sign a contract with them and so so some authors decided to write a book solo because of this, but they also noted that the weight was certainly heavier that the responsibility of the book was all on them.

So each author really had to decide for themselves. What was more beneficial for them having co-authors or working alone? And for those who chose to work with co-authors learning how to pick co-authors that they worked with well was a skill that was extremely necessary not just for the success of the book but also for their well-being.

And then for those who worked alone dealing with their multiple responsibilities was another challenge because of the writing demands were so intense one author told me that her production schedule had her writing a chapter a month and she said that on top of being a mom and a wife and a professor the load was just so heavy that when she saw that schedule it made her cry.

She said, “I just can't do this.”

So she got a co-author to help her but the work-life balance was difficult for many of the authors I spoke with, especially when they first started authoring books.

**KL:** This is so fascinating like the choices and the difficulty of those choices for those academic authors is something that's really coming out for me as you're describing this.

**LR:** Yeah, absolutely. And it has so many different ramifications that you know, as I said before they just didn't realize until they were years into writing their book and then they kind of said, “oh I made a mistake” and so they oftentimes went to a lawyer to try and get their contract fixed or adjusted or they helped others and they just said here's what to do and what not to do.

**KL:** Were there any other barriers or challenges that you found for these authors?

**LR:** Yes. I had one more major challenge, which was a lack of support and isolation in the writing process. So especially when the publisher was undergoing transition we heard about a lot of instances in which there was a lack of support from the publishing team.

So one author told me a harrowing story about her one of her books where she said “a month before my book came out everyone I worked with left the company. I had no editor. I had no marketer. I had no sales everyone left and they were going into bankruptcy a month before my book came out. So when my book did come out no one marketed it and no one did anything to it was kind of like I spent 10 years pregnant gave birth to a baby and no one fed it. It just laid there and it was really hard.”

So that's just one story that clearly shows how the author can be affected when there's large changes in the publishing world, but also in general authors discussed how isolating writing can be and how they wish for a greater sense of community in the writing process. TAA is a great source of support for authors in this regard, but some authors wish for a more local community of writers as well.

**KL:** Okay, so I know we still have to dive into supports and I really want to get into this concept of author identity development because I know you talked about this in the study as well. We're going to take another brief break when we come back we're going to dive back into both of these topics back in a moment.

We're proud of “Research in Action” and I hope you find the episodes interesting valuable and actionable if you're enjoying the show help others discover “Research in Action” by rating and reviewing it on iTunes.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Lauren, in the last segment you talked about some of the barriers and challenges for academic authors, but I know you also focused on the supports that academic authors can seek out what are some of the things that you found for your research about the things that are most supportive for academic authors?

**LR:** Yes, so it was all about people so primarily people who understand the authoring process people who can help us some specific issue the authors are having and their own personal relationships. So people who understand authoring can be mentors colleagues co-authors anyone who's been through the book writing process. Who could provide some insight or be especially understanding of the trials that authors go through.

Mentors were especially integral to the start of authors’ careers and many said that they weren't sure they'd be authoring if it weren't for the help of their mentor although some never had a mentor and they persevered anyway.

Lawyers were especially useful for learning how to deal with contractual issues with problems of plagiarism or royalty Audits and a lot of these areas were new to authors and they needed a lawyer not always to file a suit but to help them understand what rights they had as an author.

And then finally personal relationships Were of great support because the authorship rules such a large part of authors’ lives that it often conflicts with other roles such as being a parent or a partner and many authors told us that they were grateful to their families for giving them the time and space to work on the book, especially when a deadline was approaching so one author explained the support she received from her family, but she noted the emotional strain that came with that as well.

So she said, “My husband is kind of intimately involved with my textbook because it affects me so much and he's really supportive like my youngest daughter is a competitive cheerleader. So she travels a lot. So some weekends. I just cannot get out of town. I not only have my classes to teach and prepare for but I have chapters in different stages of development due and so there's been many times that he's the one who takes her to cheer stuff and stands there with all the cheer moms. But I also mourn that I have missed out on some of that because of the demands of the textbook.”

And so while people were the greatest form of support the author's primarily needed support on their book from people who understood how to write a book support on specific issues such as contract negotiations and conflicts and support and balancing their authorship role with their other life roles.

**KL:** So I can tell, Lauren, that people went deep with you these are views and they shared all kinds of things about not just their professional lives with their personal lives as well. I'm curious what you learned through this research about just identity in general of academic authors. Are there things that you learned about authorship identity development over time or other kind of aspects of identity development?

**LR:** Yes, so I found kind of a trend of five phases or themes that authors went through as they wrote their books. So. They committed to writing they learned the writing and Publishing process. They adapted to changes they became more and they embodied an author identity. So with committing to writing regardless of their motivations for writing or how they came to write or when they started writing all of the author's committed to writing a book which was that first stage in their authorship development.

Next they had to learn the writing and publishing process. And as I discussed earlier, this includes good writing strategies managing the role of authorship dealing with authors Co-authors and editors negotiating contracts with Publishers and so on there's a lot to learn here and inevitably something would happen that threw them off and they would have to adapt to changes in how they had learned to write and publish.

So perhaps their original publisher was bought out or they had to adapt to technology, which was a common one or maybe their co-author dropped the ball and they had to cover the work but all authors had something that happened along their Journey that posed a risk to their success as an author and they had to find a way to overcome it.

And so as they overcame their challenges, they grew in many different ways. So for some the book allowed them to become a better teacher because they knew the scholarship so much better and more intimately than they had before others grew as a writer and that they became faster better and more efficient in their writing some became a mentor or role model for other beginner and aspiring writers. So one author who had contract issues now collects contracts and gives advice to future authors on what to put in their contract.

And then after a successful book publication, all of the authors became more confident in their ability to write and publish a successful book. So even if the first book was a Monumental challenge after a while they said yeah, I think I could do that again.

And so finally authors and body the authorship identity. So authors reflected on core aspects that help them succeed throughout their journey and noted how authoring went from overwhelming to just part of the job. So being successful allow the authors to drop their previous doubts and concerns and instead they took ownership of their abilities and skills and they learn to see themselves as authors.

So in discussing the skills needed for authorship many realize that they had the skills to be an author all along and in regarding authorship many of them told us not everyone can do this work, but I know that I can and now it's just who I am.

**KL:** Lauren, this research is so rich in terms of what you've been able to find. I'm really curious what additional questions this research raised for you because this was a relatively small, you know set of people that you looked at. I'm sure that you thought you know, if I did this again or if I was interviewing more people, these are the kinds of things I would want to know more about so what kinds of questions did this raise for you?

**LR:** Yeah, so some of my questions were really practical application questions. So now that we know what authors face and what they need, how can we help them? And how can you put their ideas into practice? So authors are doing kind of unglamorous important work that they truly deeply care about. And while they may reach hundreds of students in the classroom, they can reach thousands of students with a textbook.

But a lot of the authors that I spoke with were somewhat dismayed about the future of authorship. They weren't sure where it was headed and they use so they weren't sure if they should become a mentor and train someone new or they tried to find a protégé but it didn't really work out and so a couple of authors confessed to me that it's really hard to know what to say and they said now that we're having all the chaos of the publishing company and digital and all the rest of it. I would feel bad having brought somebody into this mess.

And so that was one of the more grim findings of this study for me. That at least half of the author's I talk to you were concerned with the future of authoring and what it meant for authors who had built their career and livelihoods around writing and Publishing textbooks.

And so my takeaway from this work is that authors really need both social and structured support not just in writing but in the publishing process as well because writing a book is a Monumental Endeavor that can take years to complete and if it's successful, it's something they may work on for a lifetime.

And you know the author's had some really good ideas on how to build in support one of them worked in an office with a group of full-time textbook writers and she felt that it was a wonderful way to have a writing career because she had a group of authors around her for constant support others suggested forming groups within their workplace or having partners to hold them accountable to their writing which are common suggestions in the how to write a lot books.

But I think the main idea is to make support a common part of the writing culture and to build in support for authors and I love to figure out how to implement this or at least encourage others to because writing tends to be an isolating process, but it doesn't have to be.

**KL:** Well, Lauren, this was such fascinating work. Thank you so much for coming on the show. I really appreciate you taking time to explain this to us today.

**LR:** Thank you; I really enjoyed it.

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

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