Episode 168: Paul Eaton

**KL:** Katie Linder

**PE**: Paul Eaton

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

[intro music]

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

In this episode, I'm joined by. Dr. Paul William Eaton, an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University. Paul’s research interests include inquiries into digital technologies in education and human identity~subjectification~becoming; digital pedagogy and learning; postqualitative, complexivist, and posthumanist inquiry; and curriculum theorizing-philosophy in the realms of postsecondary education and student affairs. He serves as Assistant Editor for the Higher Education section of the Journal of Curriculum Theorizing and on the Editorial Review Board of the Journal Committed to Social Change on Race & Ethnicity. He is the co-author of Troubling Method: Narrative Research as Being (Peter Lang Press, 2018, with Petra Munro Hendry & Roland Mitchell). His research has appeared in the Review of Higher Education, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, Thresholds in Education, and the Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education & Student Affairs, among others. He received his Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in May 2015, his master’s degree from the University of Maryland College Park in 2005, and his bachelor’s degree from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in 2002. Follow Paul on Twitter and Instagram [@profpeaton](https://twitter.com/search?q=%40profpeaton&src=typd). His blog is located at: <https://www.profpeaton.com>.

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

**PE:** Hey, thanks so much for having me. It's good to talk to you.

**KL:** So I have followed your work for quite some time and was so excited to have you join me on the show. And then when you sent along your bio, and some information about your work, there are all these fascinating words that you're using to describe your research, like post-qualitative, complexivist, post-humanist, and some of these things I have no idea what they are. So I thought we could start just by unpacking some of this stuff and you're defining it what it looks like in your own research. So let's start with post-qualitative. What does that mean to you?

**PE:** Okay, this is a great question. So while we're going to unpack these individually, I think one thing that's important is that I find the terminology to be porous between these three ways of thinking, right? And I can sort of talk about how I've come even into this way of thinking through graduate school and through my first couple of years as a researcher in the field. So post qualitative. is, I would say it's a sort of movement, it's a way of thinking about what the limitations are that have a row that have arisen in traditional qualitative research, particularly in the realms of educational research.

So when we think of qualitative inquiry, we think about maybe ethnography, or we think about interviews. We might think about case study research, phenomenology. There's a variety of different ways that we can think about it.

One of the things that's really happened in qualitative inquiry is that it's become increasingly restrictive and reductionistic, right? And this is partially due to the fact that there's a kind of belief that positivist and post positivist ways of looking at the world and understanding the world are sort of the "gold standard." There's all kinds of forces that are aligning to make that the reality, funding for example, grant agencies the way that journals are set up etc. But qualitative inquiry is really supposed to help us to complexify the world right to make things more complex not reductionistic not easier to understand.

So what post-qualitative folks are really trying to do is challenge what we would call traditional humanist qualitative inquiry, which is just questioning all kinds of things around "what does the interview mean? How do we build relationships with research participants? Are we even think about representing or representing data and even what is data?" So what counts as data has become increasingly restricted in qualitative inquiry, and we're trying to open that space back up to make our questions more complex and to give us greater insights into the types of relationships that we should be focusing on as researchers.

**KL:** So you mentioned educational as being one place where these kinds of questions are happening. Are there other disciplines or kind of theoretical backgrounds where you're seeing this kind of post-qualitative work? Driving or starting to kind of come out of the tradition of the research?

**PE:** Yeah. So I've been reading a book this summer called *Diffractive Ethnography*, and the researcher who wrote it is kind of a health and environmental scientist. So she is kind of taking up some of this language that you might consider post qualitative. So I think there are other Arena's sociology, for example. Although they never necessarily got very far away from, most sociologists never really got far away from some of their traditional methods, but it's starting to come up in other fields and it's definitely big; it's definitely a movement in educational research right now.

**KL:** Okay, so if people were looking to find some of this post-qualitative work are there other words, phrases, keywords, they could be looking for that you associate with this? Or is it really just kind of a concept of troubling traditional qualitative methods and data and how we think about that?

**PE:** Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, I think if you were to go and look and just type in post qualitative, which sometimes is written as one word sometimes is written as two words or a hyphenated word, it kind of depends on the journal. And you might type in also words like post-humanist, right? Which is another word we're going to talk about because it kind of falls into this realm of thinking. You might try to type in "thinking with theory" because this is another aspect of the post qualitative turn is a kind of return to how we even think about the role of theory in our inquiry not just as a kind of structuring mechanism for the types of questions were asking, but even sometimes using theory as the analytic to ask different types of questions of data. So like there's a great book out, Jackson and Mazzei’s says book, *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research*. I would say that's a post qualitative type of a text where they take one interview and they read it through five different theoretical lenses. And by doing that, they come up with five different ways that you can interpret the data. So it's making it more complex rather than reducing it to, for example, a set of codes or a set of themes or one solid answer.

**KL:** Okay. This is really fascinating and you've said wait us really well into this concept of post-humanist, so let's go there next. This is another term that you use to describe your work. What does post-humanist mean?

**PE:** Okay, so post-humanism is trying to think about what happens either when we decenter the human as the area of inquiry, or when we're trying to think about what's happening to us as humans in a technological age is kind of how I think about it, right?

So if you think about cyborgs studies, for example, right? We're increasingly becoming “cyborg-ian.” We wear all kinds of technological gadgets on our bodies, were carrying things around with us that are tracking all kinds of metrics about us. In some cases when we're thinking about the advances that have been made and prosthetics and in the ways even that our internal organs are being run by machines, right? There's huge advances in that field. So what does it mean when we sort of become this kind of cyborg? And how do we think about what that means for us in the 21st century? Right?

There's also an area of post-humanist inquiry that's trying to look at the relationship between humans and animals, humans and environmental contexts. And not just in the sense of like environmental sciences, right? But actually trying to understand the impact that humans are having on animal systems, on environmental systems and what happens if we were to decenter ourselves, think of ourselves as no longer being here what will happen to those systems at some point in the future?

So it's kind of a different way of approaching research questions in terms of what we might be interested in trying to focus on. And I can give you some examples perhaps of what some of that research might look like.

**KL:** Yeah, let's dive in what are some examples that you think might be helpful for people?

**PE:** Yeah. So, for example, one of the things that I've written about what I did my dissertation research about was about how college students are utilizing different mediums of social media. So kind of thinking of social media as an ecology not as a set of like individual, sort of functioning apps, right? So rather than thinking of like Facebook is one thing, Instagram is one thing, I'm trying to think about how does an ecology of social media and digital space influence the way that we think about who we are as people as humans, right?

So one way that we can do that is to actually decenter the human in the analysis and think about what agency does the technological platform have? And how does it have that sort of agency? And how does that ultimately end up writing itself on to the human experience? Right? So it's a it's a different set of questions. You have to instead of looking at the human says this about the way that they use the instrument, you have to think about how does the instrument use the in a particular type of way? And it allows you to ask a different type of question that gets into all sorts of interesting areas around privacy, ethics, the way the technological infrastructures are set up, who owns those systems how do they have certain types of particular aims in terms of what they want you to present, for example. You know, so you kind of know about this, right?

Twitter is sort of logo-centric, it tries to get you to use dialogue and text to present certain things the hashtag, right? So there's a certain way it constructs and writes itself onto your subjectivity. Whereas Instagram is very visual, for example. Now there's machine and mashing and you can kind of get into that, but post-humanism is really trying to get us to think about those types of questions where you decenter the human, again, as the focus of the inquiry and you focus on something outside of the human as much as you can within the confines of who we are as humans as researchers.

**KL:** Okay. So, Paul, this sounds inherently interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, multidisciplinary, it sounds very philosophical, and you're reminded me of my own roots in women gender studies where we did talk about the cyborg manifesto and kind of all these things, you know, 15-20 years ago. and I think that up he's holding up the book, he's got it right there.

**PE:** [*indiscernible*] Haraway.

**KL:** Yeah, absolutely. So, I mean, I think that it's this is so interesting to kind of think about all these different strands. How are you juggling that and I'm also wondering if it ties in with this concept of complexivism, which you've also mentioned, you know, this idea of making things more complex. Let's talk about that. How are you juggling all the kind of disciplinary strands of this? And does it tie into this concept of being a complexivist.

**PE:** Yeah, it totally ties in. So actually complex-- it complexivist or you know, what I call complexivism is actually where I started. So this arises from complexity theory, which I'm sure many of your listeners will be familiar with, but broadly speaking complexity theory is about thinking in systems, thinking in systems, right? So, again, not looking at individual units of analysis, but trying to look at how things interact or interact and how they sort of make each other rather than thinking about things as discrete entities. Complexities also interested in this idea of how systems are always changing. So there's not like stasis is not a good thing, it's actually a bad thing, right? So when and the way that initial conditions are set up really impacts what will ultimately end up happening, but also from a systems view, minor little changes can really shift the direction of how a system goes, right?

And so this has been used in many, many fields. It's been used in political science to describe how social change happens. It's been used in environmental science to look at how rapid change happens in environment or how environments repair themselves after there's been some kind of damage or trauma to them.

So that's where I really started my thinking and graduate school. I read a whole bunch of stuff about complexity theory, and I was interested in applying it to education, right? Because education, much like the way we started this conversation, has become increasingly reductionistic. It's become increasingly structured by competencies, by learning objectives, by standardization, all of these types of processes that are going on in the field. And I was interested in, you know, what, how can we counteract that with a different way of thinking about education and the aims of education and ultimately research? So that led me into the post-qualitative realm and it led me into the post-humanist realm.

Now in terms of how I'm juggling all of that kind of stuff. Well, you know, I read a lot. I'm very interdisciplinary. I spend many hours a day just trying to read outside of my own discipline, but also within my discipline. And the reason for that is because I think when we stay too closely aligned, or fall too much within just reading the literature that's within our own academic discipline, we start to, it just gets boring and repetitive, right? We keep asking the same questions without necessarily solving any problems. So I think that by reading outside of my discipline, by reading a lot of heavy theory and philosophy, it allows me to ask different questions in my own field, and I think that's been really helpful for me as a person and as a researcher.

**KL:** Okay. Well we are just getting started. Paul, I’m really excited to dive deeper into our next segment. We're going to take a brief break when we come back. We'll hear a little bit more about Paul's take on research as ontology. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Paul, one of the things about draws me into your work is you have talked about research as ontological or as a way of being. Can you share more about what that means for you for your research practice?

**PE:** Yeah, absolutely. So I don't compartmentalize my research life, my teaching life, my service life and then my life-life, right? Like these things are all connected to me. So when I say that I think about research as a way of being, it’s as an ontology, it means that I try to think about things that are happening in my day-to-day world that might be applicable to what we would call traditionally, like the research arena, right?

I try to think about if I'm going a book reading, for example, in Houston with a, you know an author, or we've got a lot of that stuff going on in the Houston area. What can I take from that at our how can I see that as an act of research, right? As an act of inquiry, right? It's not simply entertainment. Same thing if you go to the theater or if you go to see a sporting event or whatever the case is, right? Like I'm constantly just, I'm always thinking about their systems at play here. There's things that are going on that I want to understand better. And so that's how I think about it.

I also think about it in terms of, you might have heard me use this term or see me use this term on social media where I say, you know, we have to cultivate our community, right? So I see that sometimes people think that like researchers are up here and students are down here, or you know, the public is over here. I don't necessarily think of research that way. I think we're all constantly doing inquiry, it's kind of a way of living for all of us, even if we don't think of it that way. And what I'm trying to build community with people or bring people into my sphere, for example, I'm trying to make that as broad and wide as possible with people who come from many different backgrounds, which is why I have a lot of cross campus relationships with faculty from other departments. It's why I'm involved heavily in my community outside of work to be able to be engaged with people who will help me to see the world through a little bit of a different lens and that just helps me to be a better researcher in my view.

**KL:** Okay. So this raises I think a really important question I can imagine our listeners thinking this question right now, and I've heard it from people who study things like pop culture where they're like "now I can't watch anything and it's not fun anymore" because I'm constantly working, I'm constantly thinking about the theories behind, you know, what I'm seeing, the way that you described, you know research has a way of being. What does this mean for kind of, lack of a better phrasing, work-life balance? You know like to how do you take a break? How do you give yourself kind of a mental break from constantly looking at this stuff? Or is that possible for you when you're kind of living this out in an ontological way?

**PE:** Yeah, it's it's a good question. I don't think there's anything such as work-life balance, right? Like that concept doesn't make any sense to me. I think it's more like work-life negotiation is the way that I think about it.

So yeah, sometimes I get burned out, like that's just the way that it is and what do I do? Well, I might do something like take a digital detox for a couple of days. I might decide that I'm just not going to try to be heavily engaged with I don't know, reading theory or reading a lot of books or trying to do writing on a day-to-day basis for a couple of days just when I'm starting to feel that kind of like things are jumbled, they're kind of messy. And it's okay to do that. So, I don't really turn my brain off entirely, but I do sort of, I would say like "power down." Like think of think of like a dimmer switch right on a in the lights, right? Like sometimes I'm way up high, you know, everything's firing. And then sometimes I have to just dim it down a little bit.

**KL:** I love that metaphor. Okay, so we know in your work you focus a lot on theories and kind of fundamental questions. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about how you approach doing some of that deeper theoretical work and not being kind of intimidated by things that maybe as you're reading it you're thinking, "I don't know if I understand what this means" because some of the deep theory is tough. How do you approach, you know, looking at something new? For coming out something from a different angle? Do you have kind of practical suggestions for how you dive into that work?

**PE:** Yeah, I actually do. So I think when I'm reading a book that's difficult to digest or that has a heavy theoretical or philosophical base. The first thing that I'm going to do is I give myself permission to read slow. I think this is very difficult for us in our culture because we live in a culture of speed and efficiency and production, right? So if I read slow then I'm able to say "well, maybe I'm only going to get through five or seven pages today," but that's okay If that's as much as I get through because I'm really going to try to understand the concepts on these five or seven pages. I do a lot of marginalia. I keep my dictionary handy for words that I don't understand, and you know, I think it's important to do that. Then usually when I finish a text what I do is I go back through and I will actually transfer either to a written note book or to a Word document all of the things that I underlined, all of the things that I highlighted and I try to put in brackets a sort of "why did I underline this? Like what was this making me think about differently? What are some questions that I might be able to ask coming out of this particular line or quote or this concept that's being dealt with within the text?"

And then the third way that I do this is I talked through it with people. So I have a reading group, or have multiple reading groups actually, so I think that's really helpful because you can bounce ideas off each other talk through it. And then write your way through it is the best way, you know, this idea of writing is thinking. So just start putting stuff on paper and seeing how it how you're playing with it, like think of writing as playing with Play-Doh or Legos, right? "Okay, here's this concept. How am I going to use it to do something with it for what I'm interested in or how does it make me think about something in my field a little bit differently?"

**KL:** Okay. So this is a perfect segue into the next question I have for you, Paul, because I think when it comes to theoretical work or kind of work that seems maybe more abstract to people, people are very curious about how do you turn that into something published? And what does that look like in terms of designing a study around that or even doing a kind of synthesis paper or more theoretical paper? Can you talk about how you take this work with your theories that you're working with and you turn it into publishable work. What does that process look like for you?

**PE:** Yep, that's a good question. Sometimes it's really hard because there's very limited spaces where people will take that kind of work. So it depends on the kind of peace that you're trying to write.

Let me give you some examples. I have a piece that's under review right now with a colleague where we took a theoretical concept from a researcher and a theorist named Roderick Ferguson, and he talks about this idea of minority absorption into institutions. So thinking about minorities dead bodies, and he talks about it largely through the realms of the way that the academic curricular structure has been formulated over the last 50 years on campuses, particularly in the United States. So, we took this concept and of you know minority absorption and we started to think about "well, how does that work in the non-academic areas of the institution?" So student services areas, athletics, things of this nature. So we take the same concept and we just are applying it to a different area of inquiry and since me and my colleague both have worked in those areas of the university, we have a lot of kind of experiential data through which we can examine that question.

So that's one way you can do it is you can kind of you don't necessarily even have to collect any new data, right? You kind of use your own experience to write through a problem that a philosopher or a theorist is trying to get you to think about.

Now another way you can do it and this is where you the thinking with theory part comes in is that you can actually take data you've collected and try to read your data through a theoretical concept.

So I took data from my dissertation, for example, and I read it through two different theoretical lenses for a paper a few years ago. I'm looking at how college students were thinking about race, class and ethnicity in social media space. One theory, I used was intersectionality theory, which is this idea that you would look at how multiple identities that are oppressed within society, how does that make you act or perform in a certain way within a social media sphere And I had some great insights by reading my research data from my interviews with participants through the theory of intersectionality. So you're actually looking for these moments when intersectionality occurs, even though that might not be what you were initially setting out to do when you read it through a theory you can find it, right? And then I read it through post-humanist theory and I was trying to look for you know to go back to our earlier conversation. Where were the moments where I saw the technology having more agency than the human? Right? So it's the same set of data, but I was able to read it through two different theories and write that up in a way that, you know, that got published and people found it to be an intriguing way to look at data through multiple theoretical lenses.

**KL:** Okay, so I know something that's been intriguing you lately, Paul, is this concept of being a research generalist, and wondering if we could talk about this a little bit because we are in an industry that has historically privileged nourishing and having kind of mastery over a very narrow set of topics--that's what PhDs really are. Can you talk about how being a research generalist works for you within an industry that has maybe historically privileged other things?

**PE:** Yeah, well, I think it works great for me for several different reasons. One thing is that it's very difficult for me to think that I would spend the rest of my life only looking at questions through one kind of method, or one kind of theoretical lens or one type of analytical approach. It's just not interesting to me. So I'm fortunate that, I think this is part of it, is that I'm fortunate that I ended up landing at an institution where they're open to these kind of different ways of thinking, right? They’re okay with the fact that I'm publishing in philosophy journals and then traditional practitioner journals and then tier-one research journals.

So there's not this kind of pressure to "you can only publish in this one area," right? Or the "these are the only journals we accept" so that allows me to have a lot of, in terms of the questions I'm asking, and in terms of I'm going to get credit for publishing even if it's not in a tier-one journal, although I have plenty of publications in those types of journals as well.

But just more broadly like when I'm thinking about the type of work that I'm doing with even the scholars that I work with at my institution, you know, this is not, I don't work at a research one institution, I work at a regional comprehensive. And so we attract a lot of students that have a lot of different questions and I think that in order to be an effective educator, an effective advisor, and effective chair, I have to be able to navigate and sort of toggle my way between different ways of knowing and different ways of asking questions so that I can best help the scholars that I'm working with. So being a research generalist in that way is really helpful when you work at the type of institution that I work with and it just works for me in terms of I'm very inquisitive. I would say I have like. You know research or ADHD or something, right? I'm like, "oh here's a bright shiny object. It looks interesting. I want to learn about that and think about it," and I'm able to do that in my job.

**KL:** So, Paul, as we're closing out, I know one other area that you feel really strongly about is mentoring the people who are coming up behind you in terms of their work and their research. Can you talk a little bit about how you attend to that in the midst of all of these other things that you're working on? How are you also supporting graduate students or other people who are needing that kind of mentorship from you?

**PE:** Yeah. So the first thing is that I just I structure my courses that I teach, for example, I structure them all as kind of inquiries into many ways of thinking about whatever the topic is that we're discussing, right? So I try to pick books and articles that come from a variety of different perspectives so that the scholars that are coming up in the masters programs and the doc programs that I'm working in, that they can sort of see a large array of different ways of thinking about problems, or thinking about questions or even seeing you can do research on this and maybe you didn't know that you could do this type of research.

I do a lot of one-on-one individual mentoring with my dissertation advisees, for example. So that's just really important to me that they feel supported, that I try to support the questions that they're asking while also challenging them to think about other ways. They might ask questions that they might not be comfortable with. So saying, "well have you thought about, for example, using this method?" Or "have you thought about maybe breaking the mold of the traditional thesis or dissertation?" In fact, I just had a conversation with a student a couple days ago about, you know, maybe you don't want to do a traditional five chapter dissertation, maybe you want to--he's a creative writer. Maybe you want to do your research and then write a novel coming out of and that's okay, right? Like we have to give our students permission to test the boundaries because I think that's part of what graduate school is about I find a lot of graduate students want to know how to do it, right? They're very concerned about method and process and, you know, all of those things, which is totally understandable.

But what I'm trying to get them to think about is that the process of writing a thesis or a dissertation is really a process of trying to experiment and explore and think about questions from a different perspective and this is really your opportunity to add something to our way of understanding the world that maybe hasn't been done before. If they're comfortable with doing that. If they're not, then okay, you're going to do a traditional, you know, multiple linear regression, or you're going to do a traditional type of qualitative study, that's cool too. Like will help you get through that particular way of thinking.

**KL:** Well, Paul, this has been such a pleasure to talk with you and to hear more about your work. Thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and chat with me today.

**PE:** Thank you.

**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.

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 168 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Paul Eaton shares about how he uses collaboration in his research. Take a listen.

Paul, can you talk a little bit about how you use collaboration as a tool within your research?

**PE:** Absolutely. This is one thing that I feel very, very passionately about. I think as researchers were kind of trained to do our work as individuals in silos. This is kind of the way the whole process is set up. Even when you go through and write a thesis or a dissertation, it's generally a solo act. But I have this saying that I like to use which is “be an et. Al.” Okay? And the reason I like to say that is because I think that as researchers we get better answers, we get better insights when we're working with other people on really complex types of phenomena that we're studying, or types of questions because, of course, we all have different lived experiences. We've read different things. We understand methods differently. We do analysis differently.

So for me, I really just try to—and you'll see on my published works, a lot of it is co-authored or multi authored pieces, which means I work on teams. So I just find that to be very important for me to be able to broaden my own thinking to have my own writing and reading habits challenged, which is why I am a part of a writing group every week. It's why I'm a part of a reading group every week with different people all across the country. You just get—I just think it's really important for people to understand that research is not a solo endeavor; it's a communal act. And I just encourage as much as possible people to work on teams and to promote that type of activity even within their students in graduate school. So while they're doing group projects or even working with your students and Scholars on collaborative research endeavors while they're in school is an important part of building a community of scholars and not seeing yourself as just a solo expert.

**KL:** So, Paul. I'm curious if you have any tips on project management when you're doing those collaborative work in teams, are there any tools or communication devices that you're using to contact other people or communicate with them but also to kind of track things like data and draft, you know, all these different kinds of things that you would have to keep an eye on?

Yep, I like to use Trello to keep track of different projects that are going on at various stages. So if you're familiar with that tool, it allows you to set up cards and work workpages is what I call them. I think they have a different term for it. But you know, basically if you have a project you can say, “Okay, well, where are we at with all of these? Where we at with data collection where we at with data analysis, how are we writing this where we writing it to?” And tracking it all the way through to the conference presentations, publications and other ways of getting your information out through either podcasts or videos things of that nature.

And then, of course, share documents, right? So Google Docs is like where we do a lot of co-writing on a lot of these projects, and then whoever is going to be the lead author will eventually take that work and submit it. So download it, submit it and then track it through, you know, the revise and resubmit process all the way through to publication.

**KL:** Alright. Thanks so much for sharing some of your insights on collaboration, Paul.

**PE:** Thank you.

**KL:** You've just heard a bonus clip from episode 168 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Paul Eaton sharing about how he uses collaboration in his research. Thanks for listening.