Episode 171: The ECRU Team

**KL:** Katie Linder

**MEDS**: Guest name

**RT:** Rebecca Thomas

**AD**: Amy Donley

**KL:** You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and 171.

[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 really excited to share something that's kind of special and that is I have asked my entire research team to come into the studio with me and talk a little bit about our logistics for doing team-based research and how we develop systems for team-based research. The more we go around and present at conferences and talk with other researchers, we often find that people have a lot of questions about how we do this kind of collaborative work together. So we thought we would answer some of the most common questions that we get about the kind of team based research that we do here in the Ecampus Research Unit. So you all know me from hosting the show, but we're going to do a quick check of around so you can get everyone's voices and introduce everyone else who's here in the room.

So Mary Ellen people should know you too from guest hosting. Why don't you go next?

**ME:** Yes. I'm Mary Ellen Dello Stritto. I'm the assistant director here at the Research Unit.

**KL:** All right, and then also some of you may remember Becca Thomas, who I interviewed earlier on the show, who's our postdoc. Becca, you want to say hello?

**RT**: Hi. I'm Rebecca Thomas. I'm the postdoctoral scholar for the Research Unit.

**KL:** For the first time on this show we have our kind of administrative super human support person who helps with all of our project management. Amy, you want to go ahead and introduce yourself?

**AD:** Sure. I'm Amy Donley. I'm the administrative program specialist for the unit.

**KL:** Okay, so we're going to dive into some questions first about the logistics of how we do some of our team-based research. One of the biggest questions that I often get is how do we decide which projects to focus on within the Research Unit. This is definitely a collaborative effort, but it's also something that I usually bring new product ideas to the team when I feel like we're starting to close something out and when I feel like we have a little bit of room on our plates to start thinking about a new project. It's also really not uncommon for new projects to come on the heels of older projects because once you get through one research project, as some of you may know, you start to have questions that have developed out of that project.

So sometimes we have projects that are connected. Other times we have projects where we decide we want to focus on something because we've seen a real gap in the field, or we've seen a question or a need that we feel like we really need to respond to. Often this comes kind of naturally out of the reading and conversations that we're doing with colleagues at conferences and by keeping up with journals and reports and other things that are going on within the field.

So we decide on which projects to focus on in a range of ways. Sometimes we're looking for gaps, sometimes it's a natural kind of outcome of work we've already done. Oftentimes it's through conversations that we're having as a team about where we want to put our energies next. The juggling of those projects has a lot to do with our timelines. I do track on kind of a modified Gantt chart where we are in terms of the initial launch of a project, the data collection phase, the data analysis phase when we're writing something up and when we're starting to disseminate so that we know when a natural cycle of a research project is starting to close and when we might want to add something into that project.

**ME:** So another question that we get asked often is how do projects get divided up amongst our group? So I think I will start to answer that question and anyone else can jump in. We have, as you've probably have seen, we have a lot of projects. We work on multiple projects at once. What we tend to do in this scenario is one of us, after we kind of settled on the project, one of us will take the lead and do kind of the organizing and pushing of the project forward. All of us get regularly updated on what's happening with that project so that we all understand where we are in the process, what is the status of that project and so everyone at least can speak to any of the projects that we have going on at once. So that's an important component of it.

Another important component is that the question often comes up in terms of, well, how do you know who leads? How do we know who takes the lead on this project or another project? That is typically based on our backgrounds, our skills and our experiences, our strengths. So certain projects, one of us may have more experience or be more comfortable in a particular methodology and so we may gravitate toward one or the other. As we've talked about on previous episodes, I am more quantitatively trained and have a lot of experience in quantitative methodologies and so I've taken the lead on heavily quantitative projects. Katie has more qualitative background and expertise and so she's taken the lead on some of our qualitative projects. A lot of times we do mixed methods, which is why it's important that we work together as a team. Often we kind of look at what our interests are as well and who has an interest in kind of championing a particular project and moving it forward.

**RT:** We have meetings where we decide who does what project. So sometimes, like for example, earlier today we had a meeting about our long-term instructors study. We did interviews with instructors who had taught online for 10 years or more. It's a big project and we came up with, I want to say about 25 different ideas for different papers. So the way we decided to start chipping away at this giant project is by each of us taking the lead on one of those projects and over time we'll get done with ideally all 25. We'll see how it goes.

**KL:** That's a really good example of when we have like a massive dataset like we do with this particular qualitative study. Sometimes I started by kind of taking the lead on organizing that project because it is qualitative, but there's no way that I could do all of the dissemination and write up by myself because the dataset is so large. So as the project has gone on, we've started to think about what is the best way to collaboratively share the load in the writeup. As Becca is referring to that has required some different meetings and discussions about what those different roles could look like.

So sometimes the projects will shift mid project or we'll start to share the load in different ways as we realize the labor involved in completing a project or moving it forward. Also as people's loads shift within the unit, sometimes people will get time like they'll close out one project and so they can devote more time to something else. So all of those factors can really weigh into how we divide up projects and how that can change over time.

**AD:** I think I would just add that our communication is a really huge piece. We all work really closely together, both space-wise and in just communicating each phase of a project. So at the least, we're probably communicating on a weekly basis if we're really busy, but at the most probably every day in some form or another, so.

**RT:** We also have weekly team meetings, so where we'll go through all of our current projects. Sometimes we have projects that we're actively working on every day or every week, and this is the time when we can give updates about those projects. Sometimes we will put a project on the back burner and we'll keep it on our list of things to bring up in these meetings. Sometimes that is just us discussing whether or not we should continue working on that project or whether we'll resume in a certain amount of time. So I think that that really feeds into our communication.

We also sometimes have, maybe not all four of us working on the same project at once, but maybe two or three of us working on that. So we'll set up meetings with that group where we can work together, discuss next steps. We also have a time where we'll piece out, say Mary Ellen and I are working on a project together right now where we'll block out two hours just to work on say the IRB for that project and we'll be working together on that. So that keeps that communication flowing even outside of just the regular day-to-day of going over to each other's desks and asking about how those projects are going.

**KL:** We talk a lot about timelines in our unit, particularly because as you've heard on previous episodes and we had an episode with Ali Duerfeldt from our marketing team talking about dissemination plans, we often think about dissemination from the beginning of a project. So we have to think carefully about when we're trying to wrap up one project so that it's not competing too much in terms of our conference presentations and webinars and other things that we might be wanting to share out results. So part of our frequent communication is around are the timelines working or is a project going slower than we thought or we need to speed something up to make sure it gets done. So we're kind of constantly juggling the projects and the timelines to make sure things are getting done.

We also frequently get asked about things like authorship order, which is a really common question when you do collaborative research. We are not kind of functioning in the way that like a lab would function where everybody in the group gets authorship on every project that goes out the door. We typically handle authorship by thinking about who really was a key contributor to that project and because we have various different roles with these projects. For example, I may act as an editor on a paper, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I would be an author on that paper.

So we try to talk about these things pretty openly, but it's definitely not kind of a foregone conclusion that everyone in the group would be an author on a particular project. It usually includes the people who are taking the lead on that particular project, which would mean they're doing the majority of the analysis and the writeup, and so that is kind of how they're earning that authorship on a particular project.

**ME:** So we often get the question, so if you've done all of these projects, how do they all get written up into different forms? In the Research Unit, we do a lot of different write-ups. We have short reports or we may just have a basic presentation or we may have an executive summary, so how do we kind of come up with those write-ups. Again, kind of as we have already mentioned, we have lead individuals on each of these projects. Often within that project, one of us will take the lead on a first draft and maybe it's even just an outline. Then the other members of that project team may weigh in or may way or may actually write a particular section of a report, but it's often a very collaborative process.

Then there's in some cases where one of the team members is actually serving as kind of a final editor. So for example, we have a series of white papers that we produce from our research fellows program and Katie serves as kind of a last set of eyes, the last kind of editorial, look for each of those papers before they go to publication. So the write-up of our projects really depends on a lot of these different factors but just like all of our other things, this is very much collaborative and team-based.

**KL:** I think we could easily say that nothing goes out the door without more than one set of eyes. I mean, we're always having at least two people look at a project and oftentimes it's the entire team is looking at something before it goes out the door in a more formal way. That's actually I think kind of a relief because it means you're not going to miss anything and that two heads are better than one in terms of making sure that you're catching those little errors or mistakes or making sure that things are contextualized in the way that we want them to be.

**RT:** Because we are collaborative and constantly communicating about these projects, I think that can be a motivation to complete the write-up for these projects. I know that sometimes difficult for people that are working individually on research projects and I think that's another pro of team-based research.

**KL:** We've also had situations where one of us will act as like a finisher or a closer on a project when someone else gets fatigued and they're kind of done. That's one of the... I think the greatest benefits of having a team-based research group is that you don't have to carry all of it yourself and that the cognitive load of working on all of these projects, you can at some point hand it off or you can ask for help or you can get someone's set of eyes on something or just talk it out with someone if it's really something that's been challenging to finish or to move forward. That's actually I think one of my favorite things about having a team.

**RT:** Another question we get asked is who on the team presents the projects that we complete? Since I've been on the team since this past September, I've seen our team do a variety of presentations including webinars and conference presentations. The answer to that question is that I've seen any author on a particular project to do a presentation on that research. Our leadership likes to know where we're traveling to and what kind of presentations we do. So I know we have a yearly meeting where we discuss which conferences we're going to, and we try to present our major projects to each of the big conferences so we can hit each of those audiences. I've seen the same project be presented by Katie at times. I've also seen Mary Ellen do the same presentation at a different conference. So as long as the person presenting was an author and did contribute to that project, we consider it fair that they will also do one of the presentations on that as well.

**KL:** One of the main things we always want to ensure is that when we're presenting our projects, the person who's presenting can answer questions based on that project. It's more likely that they'll be able to do that if they were directly involved in either the design of the project or the analysis of that project. If we have a project where someone has taken the lead and someone else's maybe contributed to that project but in a lesser way, they would still be cross-trained on how to present that particular project. We would be very collaborative in terms of things like designing the dissemination, the slides, the talking points to make sure that everybody has a really clear understanding of what it is that we're trying to communicate.

**ME:** It's pretty rare that we get to present together, but we've done some of that recently, which is a whole lot of fun to be able to present as a team.

**KL:** We definitely divide and conquer with our travel, so it is rare that we all get to go to a conference together that even just two of us would go to a conference together.

**AD:** Another question people might be curious about are what kind of administrative supports projects need? So depending on the project, of course, the type of support can vary, but one way I would say is consistent through all the projects is the need for process documentation. We definitely start with planning meetings and we carry out lots of meetings throughout each phase for project, but that initial meeting is always helpful for that wide-lens view. I would say the team already has a fairly definitive idea of where the project is going to go from start to finish, so kind of just documenting along the way has been helpful for us. As we get into each phase, taking more granular notes is really effective because there are times we do forget that we have already established a process for something and we can refer back to it, and it's been really helpful.

I would also say that note-taking ultimately helps inform timelines on my end as far as providing administrative support. That can be helpful as far as initiating processes for starting a tracking spreadsheet or a purchase request, something that the team may need and trying to just stay ahead of that so that by the time they need to start it, they can be ready to go. As far as the project moving along, that can transition into additional meetings that lead to slide development presentation meetings when it goes to the dissemination phase for the project, so. It's kind of just a long string of how the process documentation goes, but it's been pretty helpful for us.

**KL:** One of the things that we've been really fortunate to have in this particular team that I know not everyone has is Amy kind of acts as our branch manager in some ways. We have to make sure that all of the more public-facing documents that come out of a project for dissemination represent the institution and the Ecampus brand. So Amy does a lot of our slide design. So if you've ever seen us presented a conference, you'll know that we're using very branded slides. We have branded fonts. There are certain images and icons and things that we use. This also gets represented within our report drafts and so that's a big part of the administrative support. I think sometimes administrative support sounds like meetings, scheduling and purchase orders and things like that, but there's a lot of creative work that goes into Amy's position in terms of how she is supporting us in a very public-facing way when we're out sharing about the results of our work.

Okay, we're going to take a brief break. When we come back, we're going to talk a little bit more about how we develop systems for our team-based research. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** On the last segment, we talked about some of the logistics of team-based research and answered some of the most common questions we get about how we work together in collaborative research. In this segment I thought we would talk a little bit about some of the systems that we've created for team-based research, because collaborative research can be very different from doing research as an independent individual researcher. This is one of those areas that I think people have a lot of curiosity around about how we're juggling all the things and also really making sure that we have systems in place so that everyone is on the same page. So I thought we would have each of the researchers in the group talk about how our experience with collaborative or team-based research is different from what we've experienced as individual, as individuals who are researching projects on our own. So Mary Ellen, do you want to jump into that first?

**ME:** Yeah, so I'll start with building on Becca's point earlier about meetings. I think one of the big differences for me that keeps those projects going is that we have regular meetings. So Becca and I are currently working on a couple of projects and we weekly sit down and say, "Okay, when are we going to work on this project?" We literally set sometimes a block or a couple of hours of time to do that and that's been a really great kind of collaborative process. That's very different than if you're doing an individual research project and then you don't necessarily have that time set to meet with another person. Now sometimes individual researchers will set down dedicated time to do that. It's in some ways more efficient to do that in either system but having that person that you're going to meet with or a team of people that you're going to meet with really keeps those projects moving. So I think that's a key difference.

I think another key difference that I've learned as both an individual and team researcher in the past is that you have to keep up with documenting everything that you're doing, especially if you're working with a group of individuals so that you can keep track of who's doing what task, who's doing what part of the project. I think documentation is relevant for all projects, individual or teams, but it's really important to keep track of what analysis one team member is doing versus what analysis another team member is doing and then when you have those regular meetings that you can share the results that you have who have come up with for example.

Another thing that Becca and I particularly have been doing lately with a couple of our collaborative projects is that we are documenting as we go the complex processes that we're doing in terms of what research have we done, what were the results of that research, what data analysis have we completed, what are the names of the files. These are things that are extremely helpful for a collaborative team so that everybody knows where everything is. It's also really great down the line when you are working for months and months on a project and you're trying to recreate what did we do and writing up things like method sections and end-result sections and having that kind of running notes of here are the steps that we took are really, really important.

**RT:** Taking those notes and setting up the systems for saving those notes and everyone on the team knowing where to find them has been really helpful for me. Something that I wasn't used to doing before I joined this team that I've grown to appreciate is our Box folder. We use Box to store all of our files and we all have access to them. If you could see in there, there's a lot of files within files and folders and everything. They are organized really well once you know the system and it really helps, so everyone on our team knows where to go if they want a specific content or processes that we've taken down.

Something else that I've started doing on this team that I hadn't done in the past were those collaborative meetings where two or more of us would sit in the same room and actually work on a project together, whether that was an IRB application or brainstorming for a new project. I have worked with other people in the past. During my graduate programs, I had coauthors on projects, but usually what that looked like is I would sit and write up a draft on my own and then I would send that draft to an advisor or to a coauthor and they would leave little comments word. That can be a great process for certain projects and ways that people can collaborate, especially from a distance.

Something that's really cool about our team is that we are in such close proximity with each other and we can schedule these meetings where we're actually working in real time together in the same space, and I found that that can reduce cognitive load. It takes some of the pressure off of you to think of that specific wording that you want in the application. You have someone next to you reminding you or asking good questions that feed into the overall quality of whatever you're doing.

**ME:** Yeah, and I think I can add to that, that I think some people are kind of surprised to hear us talk about developing survey questions by committee. I don't know whether we'd call it a committee but as a group. Sometimes we think about designing a survey as kind of a solo activity or as the description that Becca was giving that you put a draft out and then you send it to your coauthor and then they edit it. One of the things that we do is we sit and talk about what's the question we're trying to come up with, what is the best wording for that question. We bounce those ideas around with our team members and that turns out to be a pretty effective way of kind of building our survey instruments. It's also really valuable to get different perspectives in terms of how does someone perceive a particular question. When you've got multiple people in the room developing those items, you're more likely to capture those different perspectives.

**KL:** I think that collaborative approach really allows for a more equitable research environment as well, because everybody really knows what is going on in the project and they know how we came to a particular decision. It's very rare that a decision would get made that wouldn't really be discussed with the team, especially like a big decision around research design or taking a project in a particular direction. So I think that that's something that's really unique about collaborative research. I would imagine some people who are listening to this and thinking that that could take so much time like is that just completely inefficient to be having all those discussions in the planning. I think it really does save us a lot of time in the future as we're writing up the project, as we're making decisions as the project is moving forward, because we all understand and have a shared understanding of what we're trying to do.

I also really appreciate those collaborative meetings and the collaborative writing in particular, because you get to see someone else's process and you get to learn from someone else's process. That's definitely been something where one of us will do something a certain way and then someone else will ask about like, "Oh, why did you do it that way," like I wouldn't necessarily have thought to do that, so you get to see the kind of behind the scenes of like how people put things together. That's just really fun I think from a research perspective, because we all get trained in particular ways as researchers. So to have that kind of exposure to someone else's mind and their training and how they would approach a particular project is really, it's a way of expanding your own thought process and your own kind of creativity around what research can look like.

**AD:** So another question we are often asked is what are some of the tools that we use to systematize our research? As Becca mentioned earlier just the organization of shared files has worked really well for us, but specifically this past year we've really heavily utilized a tool called Airtable, which is a collaboration tool, and we can link to it in the show notes. Airtable has been a very helpful tool for us for visualizing and collaborating on tasks and collecting information, and that has ranged from social media content building to project task tracking. For example, this past summer being our first year hosting the Ecampus research seminars, which we'll also link too in the show notes so you can learn a little more about that, we created a base that just tracks the full year of tasks. So when it comes to this next year of going through the process of research seminars, we can look back and see what tasks needed to be completed for each month.

So the Airtable tool has been really helpful for us, because we now have a place to kind of keep individual projects and keep track of them. It's just been a good way for us to structure out things as far as tasks and color-coding. So it's been a very user-friendly and versatile tool and it's pretty fun. We've had fun using it.

**KL:** Who doesn't love a little color coding with our project management?

**AD:** It's true.

**RT:** Another tool or I would say type of tool that we've used are templates. So an example that we recently developed was a template for our IRB applications here at Oregon State University. We recently switched to a new system of IRB applications where they were entirely online through a system called IRIS. So we... I wanna say we did three different IRB applications in the past six months. While we were doing these applications, we thought that it would be a good idea to create a template for our future IRB applications so we can use things that we've already created. A lot of our projects have some overlap in terms of goals and general background. So we created a Word document where we pasted in the different sections of the IRB application into this document so we can use things that we've created in the past and it's made doing applications a lot smoother. We actually use it for our research seminars program when we designed our study. I was pasting in all kinds of things for things that we'd written in the past and it was really helpful.

**KL:** We often reuse all kinds of language from consent documents, from protocols, other kinds of things that just we need some structure for. One of the ways that we keep track of a lot of this and especially when we do a collaborative writing is through a tool like Google Docs where we do some collaborative writing. We have various systems around how are we making sure that we all have access to various kinds of notes and files and templates so that we know where to draw from them.

The other way that we've really used Google Docs that I think has been helpful is we keep a shared agenda in there for upcoming meetings. So we do meet weekly as a team and we each have a section of the Google Doc that's kind of our own projects. Then we have a shared kind of project area where we can report out on things that we know we need to touch on every week. Having something like that available, it just kind of creates a good point of access for everyone in the team to really be able to add what they need to add. It serves as a good reminder I think before we go into those team meetings to be updating that document and make sure that you're kind of looking at what's on your plate and what you need to bring to the team meetings.

So having... As you've heard us talk about this entire episode, we do so much collaboration that something like Google Docs really is helpful. It's also something that when we're not all in the office together we can refer to. So a lot of the cloud-based documentation that we have is really useful.

**AD:** So we've already alluded to I think our filing system, and we mentioned Box already. So we have a shared filing system for all of our projects. So we have folders that include all of the documentation, all of these notes that I've been mentioning for each of our projects. This is a cloud-based system we use Box as we mentioned. This is also really useful because if anyone is out of the office or if anyone is not available, any of us can go in under a particular project and find the documentation that we need. So we've got a pretty nice system set up allowing us to keep track of what's happening in each of these projects.

**KL:** So as you can hear, we use a range of tools, but many of these tools are really based in collaboration. So all of these tools are pretty much cloud-based and that we can access them from wherever we need to. We also have shared accounts, and so we each do have access to a password system, one password where we also keep track of our security and how we get into these different accounts. Many of us have our own kind of login and password to team-based accounts that we've created together. So as we're thinking about new tools or systems, those are the things we always pay attention to is, is it something that's really going to work well for everybody on the team in terms of how we collaborate and the systems that we already use.

So as we're wrapping up this episode, we're going to answer just one final question from each of us, and that is what is our favorite thing about doing this kind of team-based research? Becca, you want to start?

**RT:** Sure. So I'm just going to throw out something that I've talked about before, so those include the collaborative work periods we have and also the meetings. I think those can be considered the same thing and that is that we are regularly communicating with each other and we're actually scheduling out time to meet and talk about specific projects. In my experience before joining this research unit, I know sometimes people didn't always like to have meetings. They wanted to cancel them if they felt like they could. In our particular unit, we don't work remotely very often. We're usually here from 8:00 to 5:00 in a closed space, and one of the benefits of that is that frequent communication. I think we could still set meetings if we were working remotely. I have just found that to be really helpful to be able to constantly be working with other people as we decide our next steps, as we make projects and as we chip away at all of the different projects that we have going on simultaneously.

**ME:** I will echo that. I think that is probably my favorite thing about doing this team-based research and I think probably more specifically the kind of discussions that we have as researchers. I love the opportunity to, as Katie said, hear people's different perspectives on different topics that we're talking about, our different expertise in different areas. I love that collaborative conversation that we have, particularly when we're developing a new project, but even when we're in the middle of a project and we're in the middle of analysis or we're in the middle of how do we, we're in the middle of trying to decide how do we disseminate the information, so all of that kind of collaborative creativity actually. We're a pretty creative team I think. Especially when it comes to dissemination, I love the conversations that Amy and I have about how are we going to represent this bit of data, how are we going to get the message out about the findings from our particular study. So that's what I really enjoy.

**AD:** I think I would say my favorite part of team-based research is the learning aspect from everyone. I think Katie mentioned earlier just seeing how everyone does something a little different and learning from that is just really neat to see in the team how we can keep growing and just learning from each other. Also, seeing projects go from start to finish I think is one thing that's been really enjoyable and exciting to see. Sometimes we have very full whiteboards projects, which looks exciting but also looks like a lot of work. Then we come to the end of a project and it's ready to be disseminated, and it's just exciting to see that part.

**KL:** I would also add to that that when we look at our whiteboards full of projects or all the notes, all the files, I think it's really easy to get overwhelmed. If you were to look at our website, which we can link to in the show notes, we have a list of our current projects. There is anywhere between seven to 10 projects at any given time, sometimes more. As an individual researcher, it wouldn't be possible to take all of that forward at one time. So I think one of my favorite things about team-based research is that it opens up your capacity for what you can do. Also, it gives you a shared support group where you're not trying to do it by yourself and you don't have to feel overwhelmed. You always have someone that you can check in with or ask a question of or pass something off too because you're sick and tired of looking at that data set and you need someone else's eyes on it.

That's just something that's really special. I hope that it's something that you, as our listeners, can experience at some point in your research career if you haven't already, developing a team where you can really depend on each other, and it makes the research better for the collaboration.

So I want to thank the Ecampus Research Unit team for coming into the studio with me today. Also, I want to thank our listeners for joining us for this episode of Research in Action. I'm Katie Linder, and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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