Episode 1: John Creswell

# KL: Katie Linder JC: John Creswell KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode two.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Hello and welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines.

On today’s episode, I’m joined by Dr. John W. Creswell, PhD, currently the co-director of the Michigan Mixed Methods Research and Scholarship Program at the University of Michigan and an adjunct professor of family medicine.  Previously, Dr. Creswell was a Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he taught and researched for 37 years. John has authored numerous articles and books on mixed methods research, qualitative methodology, and general research design. For several years, he served as a co-director at the Office of Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research at the University of Nebraska. He is also the founding co-editor for the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. Recently he served as a co-leader of a national working group developing guidelines for mixed methods research for NIH.

Welcome to the podcast, John.

**JC**: Good to be here, thanks for inviting me Katie.

**KL**: So it sounds like you are an incredibly busy man, you have a lot going on. I have several of your books on my shelf. A *Couple Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, as well as the fourth edition of *Research Design, Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*, so I am very excited to be able to chat with you today. I am wondering if we could start by talking a little bit about how you define Mixed Methods

**JC**: Oh that’s a good question. You know it has taken us about 25 years to come up with a rather common definition and not all people believe in it, but it is out there and used widely. So mixed methods is collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data in response to research questions. And then integrating the two data sources and bringing them together, mixing them. And using specific types of designs. And also often framing this research in terms of philosophy or theory.

So the key idea that really sets mixed methods apart from other research approaches is that we are going to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, and analyze both. But we are going to then see how they can intersect or combine to give us greater insight. My colleague Mike Fetters at Michigan talks about the formula one plus one equals three. So quantitative plus qualitative. But when you begin to combine the two, you get three, you get more value. So that’s what mixed methods is all about.

**KL**: So the way that you described mixed methods saying that it had been around for quite some time, but it sounds like it is still a little bit in development. What is the state of mixed methods in terms of the acceptability of the methods across disciplines? How do people view mixed methods in relationship to things like quantitative or qualitative methods that are used by themselves?

**JC**: It’s been catching on actually. Mixed methods, the initial thinking on this goes back to the 1985 to 1990 time period. But I would say in this century, since about 2003, interest in it has accelerated considerably across a lot of different disciplines like social sciences and the health sciences. And one thing that I think is giving it some traction is it is a very intuitive design. For example, let’s say you are watching a TV broadcast of CNN or one of the other television stations, well the broadcaster is reporting some numbers, some statistics about let’s say the tsunami and then going out and interviewing people, gathering qualitative data. So in a mixed methods broadcast, they are putting together quantitative numbers as well as personal stories of people. And we can see this, this combination of stories and numbers and so many arenas of our life. When you go to a doctor’s office, that doctor is looking at your lab values for say cholesterol, but also is interviewing you for the history of your eating and your family experiences with cholesterol. So it’s a very intuitive approach that is catching in field after field. And especially a lot right now in the health sciences.

**KL**: It definitely seems like one of the benefits of mixed methods is the richness of the data and the quantitative and the qualitative really informing each other with that approach.

**JC**: Yeah, you know for many years people just kept these two approaches, quantitative research and qualitative research separate. Why? When they can feed off each other, and we can have additional insight by mixing that combination of the two. Now we are seeing a lot of different fields use this, whether it’s sociology, psychology, family science, marketing, management, family medicine, internal medicine, pharmacy, nursing, I mean you just go down a wide array of fields. And really for all these groups I have been out presenting at their research conferences talking about how they might adopt and use mixed methods research.

**KL**: So with mixed methods really catching on as you are describing, there may be people who are trained in graduate school or as beginning researchers in these mixed method approaches. And they might not understand what are some of the reasons behind why people would have concerns about mixed methods. Are there certain critiques or challenges that are leveraged at mixed methods from people who are arguing from one side or another in terms of using only quantitative or only qualitative?

**JC**: Yeah well when you do mixed methods research of course you have doubled your effort needed in data collection because you are collecting both quantitative and qualitative. And then you are analyzing both quantitative and qualitative. And then the idea of how you bring the two together in terms of a research design is just foreign territory for most people. So there are a number of mixed methods courses that are starting up across the country. Two years ago I was a visiting professor at Harvard in the school of medicine. I helped launch their first mixed methods course there. Now you have research centers starting up that are devoted to mixed methods like the Rand Corporation now has one. We have got one at Michigan. So what we are doing is, if people don’t have access to a mixed methods course, at least they can go to a workshop or seek consulting services to get them going on their mixed methods project.

**KL**: Those sound like some phenomenal resources, we will make sure to link to them in the show notes for people who might be interested in following up with what some of these centers are providing.

**JC**: I should mention too that the American Psychological Association in the United States, if you have followed this in the last couple of years. You know they have a special interest group in qualitative research now in the American Psychological Association. So the association commissioned a task force to put together some standards for how you would report qualitative research within this traditional quantitative area of psychology. And then we also put together some standards for mixed methods. These standards will all be found next year in the APA style manual which is used by graduate students and faculty all over the world. And so I think that is another sign of mixed methods coming into its own. Becoming a well-known methodology that people are using with increasing frequency.

**KL**: Thank you for providing those concrete examples I think that is really helpful to hear about the changes that have happened with mixed methods in terms of training that’s being offered and also some definitional work that is being done. I am wondering if you can share what you see, clearly this is an area of methods that’s really not just up and coming, but it’s hear and still undergoing some changes. What are some pressing upcoming issues regarding mixed methods or other areas of research methods that are connected to mixed methods that you see coming up.

**JC**: Well as this goes out among the different disciplines and the social and health sciences, one of the particular challenges is that a lot of people think they have always been doing mixed method research. And yes, they may have gathered qualitative and quantitative data on an evaluation project. But not necessarily bringing it together, integrating the two database in kind of a systematic way. And especially not using some of the latest advances that have come forward in the mixed methods field. In addition to a quantitative research question and a qualitative research question, we know have a mixed methods question. And we know what types of mixed methods designs exist. There are various types of designs that have been written. So getting people on board with some of the latest advances is certainly one of the issues that we are working with and we are helping people understand this methodology.

And I will mention just one more, and that is that on many campuses with mixed methods coming in, people are conducting mixed methods projects. But these mixed methods projects are often spanning across different departments and fields and study. So how do you set up an academic mixed methods team where people might be trained in different methodologies and different content areas? And how do you bring them together to work on trans-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary mixed methods project? So there’s lot of challenges out there. It is a fascinating field to be in right now. It is a fast train moving along a track. And I feel like most of the time I am running to keep up.

**KL**: It sounds like there has been, so much work and so much of a foundation laid for this. But as you are pointing out still so much work left to be done. Thank you so much for sharing these insights, we are going to take a brief break and when we come back we are going to hear more from John about his tips for researchers who are just starting out and also a little bit about some of his current research projects.

# Segment 2:

**KL**: So John one of the things I really admire about the writing you do and the books that you published is that you often focus those books toward people who are maybe beginning researchers or people who are really just trying to get a handle on what are some things related to mixed methods. In 2014, you had a *Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research* and then in 2015, *30 Essential Skills For The Qualitative Researcher*. Which I think are really helpful texts that help breakdown some of the things that you were talking about earlier in this episode. And we know that one of the challeneges for learning about research methods is that they can seem very abstract when really they are quite complicated for some of the reasons that you outlined earlier. Do you have specific tips for researchers who are really just starting to learn a new method or maybe don’t have enough experience with applying it?

**JC**: You know I have an approach that I have used in my teaching and my classroom and now I am using it in the workshops that I give around the country, around the world. And that is I always ask people to bring in a project that they are working on. So this is not an abstract exercise when I take them through how to design a good mixed methods project or a good qualitative project. I am actually stepping them through some steps that I might use if this were my project, but they are going to be working on their project.

And in my recent workshops we actually have a worksheet that we use, and the participants fill out the worksheet will say now here are the key ideas and writing, studying in research questions for mixed methods projects. We will kind of go through some of the content on how to do it, and then we will turn it over to them and say now take your project and write out those research questions for your project. And while they are doing that then I walk around and have conversations with them about what they are doing to see if they are on the right track. And then at the conclusion of the activity I will have a couple of them share their projects, their questions, their research questions in this case with the larger audience. So very much of a hands on, how to do it approach. And I think that is a corner stone of my books. I try to keep them very practical, very useful. I am always thinking about if I had a graduate student in front of me, how would I tell them how to do this particular aspect of research?

**KL**: I know that you present to and work with a lot of different audiences around the world. And you are traveling frequently. I am wondering particularly for beginning researchers or people who are just starting to think about mixed methods approaches are you seeing differences in the kinds of questions you get from audiences that are US based versus outside of the US.

**JC**: In some countries they are better versed in quantitative research than qualitative and so I usually start with a primer on qualitative research and then when it is reversed I will start with a primer on quantitative when I am talking about mixed methods research. I find that the international audiences are very concerned with issues in their country. And so to prepare myself to do a talk in Bangkok, for example, I will study what are the current issues in Thailand that people are wrestling with and what are the topics that they are conducting research on? It’s probably no surprise that in Thailand that they do a lot of tourism research which lends itself to both qualitative, you know gathering personal stories as well as mixed methods where you combine quantitative and qualitative. So I try to get on board, I think that is what would distinguish the questions from country to country. Most people want to know how do you do mixed methods research, why would you use it? How difficult is it going to be for me to do? What skills do I need? It’s probably a pretty sophisticated way of doing research because you need to know both quantitative research, qualitative research, and mixed methods. So your research toolkit is really quite large. And so what skills are needed? They often ask questions about that. I guess I have been at it long enough that every once in a while I will hear a new question.

A lot of people are concerned about philosophy and you just can’t bring in the philosophy that a lot of mixed methods people talk about, pragmatism, if you are familiar with pragmatism that’s the American philosophy. And in some of these countries American policy, American philosophy doesn’t fly very well. So you have got to be sensitive to the cultures that you are working with and talk about an array of philosophies behind mixed methods research that are out there. And a lot of people are just hearing about mixed methods for the first time. And so I share with them my short little book, that concise introduction book, which can be read in two hours and is very inexpensive, and is being translated now into multiple languages around the world so that they can get a little foundation on what mixed methods is before I get up and take them into their projects.

**KL**: Well those are some really helpful resources for researchers who are just starting out. We will make sure to link to the various things that were referenced in the show notes. After a short break we are going to come back and hear a little bit more about John’s own research projects and also what it is like for him as a writer of mixed methods.

# Segment 3:

**KL**: John, many of us who know you as a prolific writer of research methods texts particularly around mixed methods and I also know that you have a range of other kinds of research work that you have done. Particularly some international work that has helped you to apply these methods that you often talk about. But I want to go ahead and start by asking what led you to begin writing about research methods and particularly mixed methods specifically? Because it is a different kind of writing.

**JC**: When I was doctoral student back in the early 70’s. I had this interest in research methods, I was known for strong measurement and statistic areas so I started hanging out at the professor’s offices and putting them on my doctoral committee. I wanted to write some books on research methods. I was teaching a graduate course on how to write a dissertation proposal. And in that course I had people, I would place this in the 1980s time period, in that course I had people that wanted quantitative research and then other people wanted to do qualitative research. So I would literally teach a class by saying okay today folks we are going to learn how to write a quantitative hypothesis. And we would talk about that. And then I would turn and I would say now we are going to turn to qualitative research and we are going to write a good qualitative research question. Just going back and forth and back and forth. And one of my students well you need to write this into a book, write your ideas down. And that was really my early thinking about intersecting or mixing quantitative and qualitative approaches.

And I started working on a book in the late 1980s, I went through multiple drafts, I tested it for about three years, and I finally sent it to Sage. They finally agreed to publish it because they didn’t know who I was at all. And it came out in 1994, that’s the research design book. And when it came out that year, and I am not just trying to build myself up here, but it became their absolute best seller of every book that they had. Now I think they had somewhere around five thousand titles running at that time. And it surprised me, it surprised them and there was one chapter in that book called Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Research, and that’s mixed methods. I didn’t call it mixed methods, but I got more inquiries about that one chapter –

**KL**: Oh interesting.

**JC**: Than any others. I remember about 1992 I went to the American Educational Research Association national conference, and I had seen on the program that there was this doctoral student that was going to be presenting on mixed methods. And I went to the session, and you know how many people showed up at that session? Two people. This doctoral student and John Creswell. And I know the student felt I was some crazy professor but I said this is the wave of the future, beginning to combine it.

And about that time I was getting all of these notes on my one chapter in research design. And that research design book is an interesting book from the standpoint of audience for it. When it came out in 1994, it was adopted at Harvard in their school of education for doctoral students. It was also adopted in undergraduate anthropology class for my son in Colorado. So it transcended levels of use. And it was my start really into mixed methods and I just kept pushing on it through the 90s and then on into this century. So that’s how I got started in mixed methods research.

**KL**: I am wondering, if you can pin down what do you find to be the most difficult thing when you write about research methods?

**JC**: Probably audience.

**KL**: Because you are writing for such diverse range.

**JC**: Yeah and also fields of study too. Because as these different fields are picking up mixed methods they are making it their own, and there are these nuances that are beginning to appear on how they are using mixed methods. For example this year there are two new books out in the field of social work on mixed methods research. When you look at those and they are citing a lot of social work mixed methods research studies that have been done and I can kind of see how it is being shaped in more of an applied area, working with people in communities, other ways too. So different disciplines, different levels of understanding of audiences. On the one hand, my mixed methods book with Plano Clark is an advanced mixed methods book, and then the concise introduction book is a beginning mixed methods book. And so I might bring that beginning book into a setting where people have been doing mixed methods for several years and may need more advanced. So try and understand what people know about mixed methods and to tailor my message to this to fit their needs.

**KL**: So my next question is a very practical one, I know that you travel quite a bit, and I am curious what are some strategies that you use to fit in writing and research when you are traveling around the world?

**JC**: Well my favorite story on this question is one of my best journal articles that I ever wrote was written in the Detroit airport.

**KL**: Oh really?

**JC**: My wife will tell you that I can write almost anywhere. And so I think I can focus pretty well wherever I am. One thing is right now I have got seven books that are all going to renew editions. On some of those books I have a co-author working with me so that takes a little bit of the writing burden off of me. About every semester I am working on a new edition of a book. And I think over the years I have probably learned to write fast and to be efficient about my writing. If you talk to any of the people on my research teams, they know that I am a stickler for efficiency.

In fact I just had that with this American Psychological Association team I was with. They wanted to come up with drafts first, I said no, just write the final edition. The final version and try to make it as polished as possible right at the beginning. That’s kind of my approach, I don’t put the word draft on my paper, I am actually thinking about chapters that I am writing as final versions and what they would look like. But you know I have been at this research thing for 40 years so I have become accustomed to conceptualizing and writing quickly.

I also have scheduled my time. For example my current job at Michigan, it’s only a half time job at Michigan because the other half I use for my writing on my books and working on national projects. So I try to schedule my time, I work in the morning, I usually write. I don’t write more than four or five hours at a time. I really like the approach that the economist John Kenneth Galbraith used. He would write in the morning and then knock off and then in the afternoon he would relax and do fun things. And he would have dinner parties in the evening. That’s the goal that I would aspire to.

**KL**: That sounds pretty good.

**JC**: In my life. Yeah.

**KL**: So I am wondering if you can share a little bit about what the process is like when you have a book that is going into a new edition. How do you kind of review that text and decide how to make changes to it?

**JC:** When I am working on a new edition, there’s pretty much of a protocol out there. I get comments the publisher sends out the last edition of the book. And I will often have five individuals that I don’t know, it is blindly reviewed, comment on how the book needs to be improved. And I will get back type notes from my publisher that summarizes all of their points. Some of my books, I have had as many as 25 single spaced pages to plow through. And then I go through those notes of what reviewers have said and I will look for what I call the pearls of wisdom, the little gems that are in there. Because people have great ideas and things I have never thought of, so I put together that list and share it with my publisher and I say these are the things that I really see that would really improve this book that the reviewers have said. And then I go through it chapter by chapter. A lot of my work, since I am working with multiple editions, let’s see my Merrell book is in the fifth edition. My qualitative Sage book is in the fourth edition. So when you get to these higher order editions, a lot of the work is reviewing the references to make sure you have the latest work. Because some of these authors will, just like me, put out multiple editions and you want to be able to cite their latest edition.

Bringing in current examples, because I write across the social and health sciences for my research book, I try to draw in examples across a wide array of disciplines. Sometimes, especially mixed methods since it’s such an evolving methodology, there’s always new ideas put in. So sometimes I will rewrite entire sections. And I will try to keep the book at about the same length as it was before. Because when I start adding a lot of new pages, then it bumps up the price and publishers want to keep the price at about the same. Yeah roughly the same.

So those are some of the approaches, when I am working with a co-author we will go back and forth on ideas. I did that today with one of my co-authors on my third edition of my mixed methods book. We will share ideas about how best to do thing. Right now we are cutting one of our tables down because it is way too long. I am rewriting one of the chapters because so much has developed in the mixed methods field since our last edition. It’s not work that is bad. It’s maybe not as exciting as developing a new book, but, and I take it just chapter by chapter. I think the key to writing any long piece of prose is to think about smaller chunks of it, it’s not a big mountain to climb it is a series of foothills you cross on the road. And that’s how I kind of think about these books.

**KL**: Well that is also a really wonderful final tip for me and our listeners. I want to thank you so much John for taking the time to talk with me today.

**JC**: Thank you. Good questions, it has been fun.

**KL**: Wonderful, yeah fun for me as well. Show notes with information regarding topics discussed in this episode can be found at the research in action website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast. To share feedback about this episode, ask questions that could be featured in a future episode, or to share research related resources, contact the extended campus research unit via twitter @ECResearchUnit. If you listen to the podcast via iTunes, please consider leaving us a review.

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# Bonus Track 1:

**JC**: I think another one is how mixed methods is going around the world. So in, uh, 2013, the international mixed methods association started. It’s called MMIRA. Mixed Methods International Research Association. Well that association has grown now to 800-900 people all around the world. So one of the issues then is how does mixed methods go into another country so that it’s just not, you know, embracing an American or a British—because mixed methods has historically has been mostly Anglo-American in its orientation—but how does it become culturally relevant to how research has been done in these other countries? And, uh, that’s an interesting issue because some countries, let’s say Thailand or China, have been very quantitative in their orientation. And so now, in order to do mixed methods, they need to understand and learn about qualitative research. Just the reverse is true in other countries like South Africa where they have traditionally been very qualitative in their orientation. So now they need to embrace quantitative research more if they are going to do mixed methods research. And then, you know, we’re trying to map, uh, how does this Anglo-American approach to research that’s developed since 1985, how does that begin to shift when it goes into other countries around the world? You know, some of these countries, uh, for example, Canada, and a lot of the commonwealth countries, are very philosophically-oriented, as opposed to procedures-oriented, you know, um, they didn’t have such an emphasis on, on how to do it as we’ve had here in America, you know, Skinner’s approaches and the survey approaches, and World War II, so they come at research from more of a philosophical standpoint, so one of the challenges is what, what philosophy provides understanding for doing mixed methods research. And that’s an evolving field.

# Bonus Track 2:

**JC**: Let me mention something about what’s happening in health sciences. Of course, in this last year, I’ve gone from educational psychology and now I’m in family medicine at Michigan. And in the health sciences there’s tremendous interest in mixed methods largely due to a taskforce that the National Institute of Health put together in 2011. I helped to chair that taskforce—there were about 20 people—we put up some guidelines called “Best Practices in Mixed Methods Research in the Health Sciences.” That, those guidelines went up on a website and within three weeks there were 19,000 hits on that website.

**KL**: Wow.

**JC**: Which made it the most heavily hit website for this research office at NIH. That was then followed by the workshops that NIH sponsored that linked mixed methods into timely health projects like, there was one on trauma and mixed methods research, there was one on implementation science and mixed methods research. And then, um, in 2014, they funded a major project that I’m delighted to be part of. It’s based out of Johns Hopkins University, their medical school, and Harvard. And now the University of Michigan is the third partner in this, and we are training 50 health science researchers in mixed methods research. Some of the top young emerging scientists in the country are coming to our training program. So this has all propelled a lot of interest across many different health science areas in mixed methods research and it’s quite unnatural because, you know, they’ve been doing these randomized control trials, these experiments, for years in the health sciences. But now you can add qualitative data in there and follow up an experiment and find out why a particular treatment worked or it didn’t work. And, uh, the Obamacare money has also supported this group called PCOR [patient-centered outcome research], which is also bringing in the personal stories of people in the health communities to augment the quantitative numbers that they have. So there’s a lot of initiatives going on in the health sciences that are pushing mixed methods forward.