Episode 25: Dr. Patsy Moskal

# KL: Katie LinderPM: Patsy Moskal KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode twenty-five.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: 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. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Patsy Moskal, the Associate Director for the Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Central Florida (UCF).  Since 1996, she has served as the liaison for faculty research of distributed learning and teaching effectiveness at UCF. Patsy specializes in statistics, graphics, program evaluation, and applied data analysis. She has extensive experience in research methods including survey development, interviewing, and conducting focus groups and frequently serves as an evaluation consultant to school districts, and industry and government organizations. She has also served as a co-principal investigator on grants including the National Science Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and Gates-Foundation-funded Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC). Patsy has co-authored numerous articles and chapters on blended and online learning and frequently presents on these topics. In 2011 she was named a Sloan-C Fellow in recognition of her groundbreaking work in the assessment of the impact and efficacy of online and blended learning.

Thanks so much for joining me, Patsy.

**PM**: Well thank you Katie. Thanks for having me. It’s always nice to talk to other researchers.

**KL:** So you know one of the things that we have in common and I have followed your work for several years now is distance education research. This is an area where that you have so much experience. I am wondering if we could start with just you talking about some of the current projects that are related to distance education research and what are some of the research questions you are focusing on now.

**PM:** Sure, absolutely. Well, we have been researching both online and blended learning for quite a while now since UCF began offering online and blended in 1996. Those are kind of an ongoing thing and we just continue to monitor the trends at this points with those two initiatives. But most recently we look at always the new technologies that UCF gets in involved in. Right now were doing impact involution of our adaptive learning initiatives. So we have been researching that since we began in 2014. We’re trying to encourage more faculty involved with adaptive learning and find out where that fits bets within instruction.

**KL:** That sounds really interesting. For our listeners that who may not know, what is adaptive learning.

**PM:** Well that’s a good question. Adaptive learning is and there is a number of software products that are calming to be adaptive. Basically if you think of it you can think of it as a GPS for students. So if I go to for instance google maps tells me the most direct path or the best path that I can take. It actually gives me multiple pathways that I can take to get to an endpoint. From the student experience, we have a certain amount of knowledge coming into a course, and as instructors and faculty, we want students to learn a certain amount of material when they finish a course. So this kind of helps them get from the beginning to the end and there are many pathways for the students. The system itself adapts according to how well the students do various nodes and topics. So it takes into account their prior knowledge and their current knowledge and how well they do. Adjust their pathway, adjust their map, their learning map based on how they perform. So each student may have a different path or a slightly different pathway through the material but they end up at the same result in terms of learning.

**KL:** I know that adaptive platform, adaptive software right now is a pretty popular thing. Really tied in a lot with personalize learning. As you are looking at evaluating this on your campus and doing some research on it, what are some of the kinds of things that you are looking at and what are some of the data you are collecting and the questions that you’re asking about these platforms?

**PM:** Well it’s been really interesting we have the common measures that we use for online and blended and a lot for our technology enhanced instruction at looking at how it impacts the students and how it impacts faculty. So from the students stand point, we try to survey our students every semester. So near the end of every semester, if they had experience with an adaptive learning course we try to capture what their perception were of the system, how well they felt it work, and any challenges they had. We’re also looking at, in terms of interaction, these platforms tend to be put you in an isolated environment because it’s really is just the student interacting with the content. So, how did the student feel about their interaction, do they want more of their interaction with each other, do they miss that and so forth. So trying to get the student voice in terms of how did they like this compared to what they would consider a more tradition class for instance. That’s part of it. We also have our student perception of instruction, our campus has the student ratings form that is a high stakes for our faculty and is used for promotion and tenure. It’s kind of a critical thing if we are trying to recruit new faculty to try and improved teaching methods because if you get dinged on your student ratings that can impact your promotion and tenure and possibility to get some teaching awards. So our faculty do pay attention to those and it’s something we have looked and trying to compare with, you know, if there is any time a new instruction or a faculty is doing something creative in their class we try to help measure the impact on student ratings. And then within the system there are a number of indices that the system keeps track of. So we are looking at that in terms of is it behaving the way we think it is, how adaptive is it, and how do those measure in terms of knowledge date, knowledge covered and so forth. How do they translate into student the outcomes? And ultimately we are looking at student outcomes. How do students perform in these classes compared to those that aren’t adaptive? Both within the course and any external measures for instance our physiology, general physiology course has an external measure that is required for all the students that take general physiology. So that was something we could look at comparing how the system connected with the external measure. So basically our moto is uncollected data cannot be analyzed if we can get data we try to get the data and see what we can find in terms of research.

**KL:** That is quite the constellation of data that you just described to help you answer some of those questions. You know, it makes me think that distance education research there is so many components and so many factors and variables that can be involved in it and it can make it really challenging. I am wondering if you can talk a little bit about that. What are some of the that challenge or maybe addition challenges that you have encountered in distance education research more specifically.

**PM:** Well that is really interested. I have been involved with research for a long time probably longer than I want to admit. Back in the days when we had paper based surveys. I mention our student ratings, our student ratings used to be paper based and now they’re all online even for class that are face to face. So back in the day if you surveyed a class everyone would who was there that day would get a copy of the survey and chances are the majority of people would actually complete the survey. So you had a concrete idea of what your response rate would be with that survey. Now everything online and, quite frankly, I think students and people in general I know our faculty are too are kind of surveyed to death. When we send out surveys you know we send them out, whether we send them out through email or you try to email them out through an individual course. We may try to put it on a splash page for the learning management system or we call it web courses for students to access. There really is not an indication how many students who actually read it. They pay attention to that email or that indication we have a survey and we would like to have your help. And then them to respond is really a challenge. So often faculty will use extra credit but from an institution review board you have to give them an alternative choice in terms of earning extra credit to keep it equal and not sort of entice them into doing the research. So that is a big challenge is trying to get actual responses and I think you can calculate your responses now is very different than when we used to do it. I guess you could argue if you mailed out surveys maybe it was a similar thing because you never know who actually opened the envelopes, so they may have not seen a survey but you know you could get back some but not all. So that is part of the challenge that we have now is trying to get data. Another one, which kind of a big gripe with me, is we have access now to so much analytics that is captured automatically from these software systems and it’s an awesome thing. So everything from you know our learning management system has data that is captured from students has data that is captured on students how they interact with the various features that are offered and individual platforms have software that they capture to you know can really help us see how students are interacting and how much time they are spend on various pages and so forth. But from a research stand point getting that data back in a useable format and I’m thinking I want a big research file of just raw data. That is often really challenging. It doesn’t come back in a format that I can use and trying to get it from other vendors is often something that is kind of difficult. So that is a common complaint that I here from other folks as well. So many of them might give you pretty charts and graphs or maybe they are more faculty centric they’ll just give you some you know charts. If I see a chart on a page I know what data, you used to create that so I want to actually see the data so I can you know cross reference it with grades and what’s in the gradebook and any student information system data that I might have. So that kind of been a challenge too. Which is interesting, you know we have access to all this data but no all was the ability to capture it.

**KL:** I think that is such an excellent point and it really just raises the question what does it mean to have access to that data. We might have access in a technical way but not really given the outputs that is coming to us in. So thank you for sharing that. We are going to take a brief break when we come back we are going to talk a little bit more with Patsy about her research productivity be back in a moment.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** So Patsy in your current role you are situation within the Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Central Florida, and you’re the Associative Director for research there. I am wondering if you could share a little bit about kind of the structure of that unit and other people who you might be collaborate with that unit as you are working with research projects.

**PM:** Absolutely. So I am part of the unit called Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness. And we are a pretty small shop. There is me and my colleague Dr. Chuck Dzuban and we have two graduate assistants and actually just one consultant who does some editing work on the side for us. So there really only two full time people and only one or two graduate students depending on the semester and whether they have internships and so forth. So we are not afraid to ask for help from other people across campus. We actually do some work with our institutional research office. We rely on them for so of the data. We work with our faculty center for teaching and learning in trying to get their help if we need to in terms of supporting faculty and you know anybody else. We have worked with the data mining institute before, some of the folks in education. So we have friends all across campus and we are not afraid to work together with other people to try to get the job done.

**KL:** Well I think that collaboration is such a key component of research and kind of moving things forward. In your shop, about how many projects do you have going at any giving time. Is it even something you can even quantify?

**PM:** Well that’s a good question. It is kind of always state of flux. We have two jobs really. One is evaluating impact of distance technologies, technology enhanced learning. For instance, our online, blended, and adaptive learning. So those are kind of ongoing evaluations that we do on a high institution level. We also help support what’s known as the scholarship of teaching and learning. So individual classroom based projects. We try to encourage faculty to do research on improving their teaching. And so we basically eliminate the grunt work we try to make it easy. We have faculty come in anywhere from I have a research idea but don’t have any idea how to do it to here is my pot of data can you help me analyze it. So we kind of make a deal with them we tell them we tell them. We tell them we will you design their research; we will help you find protocols or construct surveys. We can have our graduate assistants find try to see what other researchers have done in the area and look through the literature to find out what is out there. We will help you with institute review board because IRB is always a kind of fearful stumbling block for a lot of faculty especially. We will help you gather the data if you need us to do focus groups for your or administer a survey. We’ll construct it in Qualtrics maybe and well help you get it out to students or we will go to your class if you have a paper based survey for instance. We analyze the data and we give it back to them publication quality format. So we give them charts and graphs. They can publish, present, it’s their own intellectual property and it’s all free of charge. Part of that has been really, it’s allowed us to see individual research projects across campus and has been very productive particular in terms of faculty doing using technology and being able to see how that morphs you know the various creative ways that faculty do things across different disciplines.

**KL:** So I’m listening to all of these services that you offer and I am incredibly jealous that I don’t have a service like this that I can work with and collaborate with. I imagine some of our listeners are thinking the same thing. So I can imagine your plate is pretty full and that people are using this quite a bit. What some strategies that you are using to prioritize your research projects, especially given that you are providing this service to a range of the faculty on your campus?

**PM:** Right, well I think that saying know is an art that we all should learn. I’m not very good at that. I tend to take a lot on. Part of it is I just enjoy what I do a lot. But practically with faculty you know it is really important for us not to overextend ourselves and because we don’t to promise something we can’t deliver. So we you know so far that hasn’t been an issue for us. As I said often, it sounds like a lot of work but people come into that pipeline in varying degrees of researching. And faculty are very busy so often they have ideas but you know this semester they just want to talk about it but then something gets in the way and they can’t actually do the research and so another semester goes by. So we kind of have people coming in and out. We also because we do this a lot we kind of a bank of surveys and we have access to student information system data that we can help them look at different demographics of their students. So I mean some of them is kind of more of repeat of the same thing. And our students we try to hire in programs where they are comfortable with research they may have had research experience or some statistically work in terms of spsf or stats or something like that. So it is an issue we have to make sure we do that and then there is the occasionally opportunity that presents itself that your given and you can’t pass up. Particularly those things come from your provost or from some other outside influence where you might have to answer a question that comes up randomly. It is definitely you know being able to juggle time is part of the challenge.

**KL:** So one of the things, I think especially as a seasoned researcher it may be that you know you have built up a network of relationships where it’s not too difficult at this point to keep your pipeline full. But are there any strategies that you’re using to insure that you kind of have a project on deck? You know, as your wrapping up, maybe something else that you’re working on?

**PM:** We do advertise. I mean we try to recruit on an ongoing basis. So every semester our university has a faculty development program that is offered by the center for distributed learning to those faculty who are developing or redesigning an online or blended course. So we try to, it’s a perfect environment for people there, at that point they’re kind of worried about get their course up and ready for the next semester. But you know a lot of them have, we usually can find one or two who have an idea for research but didn’t have a way to do it and then here we are offering them some, an easy out. We’re offering them some help; we are doing some of the grunt work. We also advertise our faculty center for teaching and learning, which is our campus wide for faculty development program. We do a lot of work with them and both their new faculty orientation and also they have a summer and winter workshop for faculty. So we just had that in between our spring and summer semesters and I worked with them to lead one of their cohorts and picked up a few faculty there who were interested in doing some new research ideas. So there are always people that you know, then we have a few faculty who kind of keep coming back through the pipeline because part of the best I think to me one of the best thing of doing the job is the faculty that want to do research on teaching are typically the best faculty who are really interested on doing a great job. And that is always fun to find out what they are trying what’s new and improved in the teaching area. We typically don’t have a problem keeping people in the pipeline.

**KL:** That’s a great, I mean that’s wonderful to hear that there are so many people who have an interest and who are interested in kind of developing what they are seeing in a classroom and putting it out there. I am wondering when, if ever, do you decide to pass on a research collaboration?

**PM:** Definitely, I think you know we all know our limitations. So if this is something that we can’t do, we physically don’t have the ability to do. Then we have to take a pass or we try to put them in touch with someone if we know who can, we try to put them in touch with who can help them out. Another thing we don’t do is program evaluation, and get involved with some of the grant work. It has to be specifically related to improving teaching. So we are focused on teaching effectiveness and SOTAL research, which is very different to program evaluation. So we try to limit it in that regard as well. And then finally I think you know deadlines are a big motivators. If we find that we can’t, if they have a very limited time frame and there is not a way for us to get it done for them in the time they need too. We are not afraid to say no, or at least tell them realistically. For instance, somebody comes in and wants to do something they haven’t done the IRB, but they want to do the survey next week, that’s kind of difficult. So we tell them here are the limitations and here is what we can do, and if that’s good, then we work with them. If not, you know, we have to take a pass. So that’s is part of what we do. There are those things that you can’t say no to and so those obviously take priority.

**KL:** Absolutely, I think we have all found that. Thank you for sharing that about this research initiative for teaching effectiveness. I think it is really fascinating, you know how you’re collaborating with faculty and helping them to do their work. We are going to take another brief break. When we come back, we are going to hear a little bit more from Patsy about areas of distance education that need more exploration in terms of research. So back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Patsy one of things that I am really interested in hearing from you, given your experience in this field of distance education research, is the areas that you think need the most exploration in the immediate future. What are some of the gaps and the areas that we need to fill?

**PM:** That is a really interesting question. I think so much of what we do in education and what we hear about is driven on the next shiny object. I mean if you’re a Pixar fan, you know the squirrel right. So if you’re thinking about the Gartner hype cycle and what is everything that been there we tend to jump on the bandwagon because that’s I think we just at a wonderful time where there is so much going on in terms of improvements in technology and new kinds of software. For us as researchers to looking at big data and ability to able to analyze to large amounts of data to look at different models of student behavior is really a cool thing. I think for me the point we need to not to lose sight of is that we really is to stay focused on our students. So it’s easy for us to get lost in the shiny object or you know the next thing that is going to save education. There have always been things that are going to save education, but we really have to stay student centric and focused on what is best for the students. I think an example of that is learning analytics. There are a number of different initiatives of going on learning analytics and right now a lot of folks are trying to predict student success and what factors impact student success. And that is kind of, in some sense, an easy part of the equation. The more difficult part is what do we once we know that. How do we intervene? What interventions work best for different groups of students? And I think there is probably not a one size fits all. And that’s really a challenge. That’s a lot more difficult in terms of research. How do dig deeper? So I think we have to be careful as researchers we are going as far as we can and making sure we are getting the whole picture. So included students in the voice as well. So you know part of is we know from a research stand point we focus so much on the quantitative research and number crunching. The qualitative side is a lot more difficult, and a lot more time consuming, but it often telling you why something instead of just the what is happening. The what is happening might be the easy part but the why is a lot more difficult and requires more effort on our part I think to really to dig deeper and look at those issues.

**KL:** I think you raised a really important point, which is that good research and sometimes deeper research can take time. And that if we’re think about kind of immediate impacts on students, we maybe researching a group of students that the kind of outcomes from that or the interventions that result from that research might not directly impact that same group of students. It might impact another group that comes down the line you know a few years later. And I think that is one of the challenges of education research is that we don’t always have that immediate impact. It’s just not always possible.

**PM:** Definitely, and I do think were a fast society. We want instant gratification, right, we want instant feedback and research takes time. Sometimes you don’t get the answer you want the first iteration, but that’s why you really need to stay the course. You know continue to, replication is an important part of the research that we do I think. I think looking at trends across time is as valuable as, or more so as a one shot deal. So I think it definitely does time and I think it takes determination to stick with it. So I think you know we have to be careful to not to let technology drive the research but focus on good instruction and what’s best for our students and what’s best for our faculty. And remember, you know the value of research it does give us some of the answers to what’s going on and an anecdote is the alternative and the absents of good research anecdote is really what we hear. So I think that is something we need to focus on.

**KL:** You know one of the areas that is kind of interesting about distance education research is that vendors are really kind of playing to some degree they are playing role in this. I’m wondering if you have seen any of that in your work. What is the role of venders in some of these research initiative questions?

**PM:** That is a very good point. I think that are vendors who are interested research. I know that with our adaptive learning we have used a realized a platform and have worked with the researchers to gather data on the backend. So a lot of the analytics data. So they have been very helpful kind of we speak the same language in terms of trying to gather the data. I think there is a role for vendors in that. I think that would be a critical part of looking at a vendor at making sure that it’s important for them to make sure you get the data you need to answer your research questions. I don’t know if all vendors are that way. I mean it’s always a challenge because you know whether its faculty developing courses or its vendors selling platforms, you’re trying to get to set one first. Research often down the road I think. But for those of us that do research we understands the importance of starting from day one of gathering data and the importance of having your design in place and you can have access to the data you need to try to answer your research questions.

**KL:** I would imagine to, I have experience this to some degree here with Ecampus at Oregon State is that some vendors are on a pretty quick timeline. There trying to make changes to their product as quickly as possible in order to positively impact student learning and there can be a real difference in terms of timeline with research as when compared to product development. And I think that is something that is kind of interesting to talk with vendors and they don’t really sometimes realize how long it can take to conduct some of these research projects. And to get some of the kind of sample sizes you need to really answer the questions that they are posing. It is an interesting landscape for sure.

**PM:** Yeah definitely, I do think if we could get data, if we could convince vendors to give us easy access to raw data you know. I always joke when I talk to them that I want a button that says download and I want it to download it to a spreadsheet or a comment to limited file for me. I’m speaking like the constant research nerd there. But I mean that is really step one that is easy for them because they are already capturing that data on their other side. So just give me access to some of the data that you have on the other end and that’s very helpful. You don’t have to give away your secret sauce or some of the details on that but just some of the student behavior variables are really critical and really important to see and have access for people who are doing some evaluation work we try to do.

**KL:** Well in a perfect world we will keep our fingers crossed that data will become available from the vendors. I wanted to thank you so much Patsy for joining me today and sharing some of your experience with distance education research and some of the work with research initiative for teaching effectiveness at the University of Central Florida. So thank you very much.

**PM:** Well thank you for having me Katie. It’s been a pleasure.

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

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