Episode 76: Rolin Moe

# KL: Katie Linder

# RM: Rolin Moe

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode seventy-six.

# [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. 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. Check out the show’s website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by Dr. Rolin Moe, an Assistant Professor and the Director of the Institute for Academic Innovation at Seattle Pacific University. Rolin’s 15 plus years of working with formal, informal and nonformal learning institutions have focused on empowering all members of the community to engage teaching and learning. In formal education settings, Rolin works across the environment to conceptualize, design, implement and assess learning environments and models. Outside of formal education, Rolin celebrates the gap between artifact design and learning assessment at such as the Museum of Modern Art, LinkedIn and the nonpartisan Annenberg Learning Center at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Rolin!

**RM:** Pleasure to be here, Katie.

**KL:** So I want to start by talking a little bit about the responsibilities of a critical scholar, because I know this is something that is really central to your work, it’s something you’ve thought about a lot. What does it mean to you to be a critical scholar?

**RM:** I think that the way criticism is looked at in our society is flawed. When we think about receiving feedback in a written form – uh criticism has been historically the manner in which we discuss that, and it’s not a negative, but it is a response. Um so I think about kind of the previous generations of academic conferences where a keynote would give a presentation, and then there would be responses from others in the field, and those responses would be critical. Not necessarily negative, um but further asking questions that hadn’t come up, or things that became evident from reading the piece and listening to the presentation. Putting different lenses into the space. And so I feel like, especially in the field of educational technologies and in some ways in the field of education, we have this – this idea of Omni benevolence in what is happening and what we are doing. Education for the greater good, for the public good to increase upward mobility and allow people to be publicly useful and privately happy citizens. It’s a wonderful call for all of us that are in education, but because we have that call doesn’t necessarily mean our best intentions are filling that – that ideal. So in being a critical scholar and employing critical theory in the work that I do, I want to challenge those assumptions that we don’t think about, we just let go as a fiat so to speak. So I think about the articles that I read, and the papers, and the books where we’re discussing policy or philosophy and we will define important terms before we get into the heart of the article. And my interest is discussing those words that are so important in a way that we don’t define them. That we just assume we all know what they mean. What I find when talking about education and educational technology is that in a lot of cases we lack conceptual space for that. And so my idea of criticism is not to down play anyone’s ideas, but rather to make a note of, maybe when we talk about this particular topic we’re not thinking about it – we don’t have the same understanding that we expect to have in that space.

**KL:** So I love this idea of thinking about criticism as questioning what some people think are shared assumptions, and it reminds me of an earlier episode we had with Jason Osborne talking about data cleaning, of all things, um but he said that in a lot of academic articles there is an assumption that people cleaned the data when they don’t talk about it. Um and we can’t always make those assumptions. So I think that you’re right; in many disciplines, and even across disciplines, we have these assumptions that we make about language or around process, that if we’re not kind of poking at those things and saying you know “Are we making the correct assumptions about this?” we can’t make those assumptions. I mean I think that’s kind of the point, is we have to be questioning those things. Um I’m wondering if we can dig in and get some examples of critical thinking from your own work, what are some ways that you’ve seen this enacted in your particular field?

**RM:** To just touch on what you just said there because I thought that was great about the data cleaning. You know, I don’t want to say in the hard and soft sciences, but in the traditional sciences, biology, chemistry, we see something and then we want to test it to make sure what we are seeing with our eyes is what is there in the research. Um and so that same idea applies not just to social sciences processes and pragmatics, but also to some of those assumptions that we hold. So for example, about 5 years ago the Samuel Beckett *Worstward Ho* quote of “Ever tried, Ever failed. Try again, fail better.” Became this mantra that was being utilized in educational technology, and there were links made to how it was used in Silicon Valley. There’s a tennis player from Switzerland who has that quote tattooed on his forearm. And in thinking about this ethos of failure, I was thinking about educational practice. So we’re hearing people say, “We need to fail, we need students to fail, failure is good,” but then I’m thinking about what failure means to a K-12 student. Failure in educational parlance is a finality. It means that you did not provide the right tools or right artifacts to show that you understand the topic, and so you were stopping and you have to completely start over, do something again, or give up. Um very, very negative connotation with failure, and suddenly we’re being told “Well they’re not failing enough” or we’re codling them instead of failure, and if you think about the educational literature we have plenty of examples of what I think people want to address with failure, whether it’s problem based learning, design thinking, activity theory, trial and error. Why was failure the word people wanted to use? And so I did a deep dive into one, the connotation behind Samuel Beckett and why this quote had become popular in Silicon Valley press and now educational technology. And two, was there a direct link between that problem-based learning that we can see in the pedagogy and the language that we were using? And what I found was there was not one. That we had appropriated failure in that way, that business and entrepreneurial thinking was using this word and it had flown over to education without that tether. And so that was one example of a place where employing critical theory and making sure you knew that there was a lens that was there, that we define our terms in moving over into that space. The same thing with MOOCs. So MOOCs are going to save the world. It’s easy to laugh about that today, but in 2012, 2013 there was a great deal of ink spilled towards that topic. So what was the history of distance in online education? Was it as idealistic as those people who are maybe anti-Corsera, Udacity, MOOCs were saying, and how did that relationship fit in with the other one? So again, you have this historical dive into the literature to look at what the history of the MOOC is, why the George Siemen’s 2008 version, a very connectivist learning that gets this funny moniker, turns into New York Times’ 2012 Word of the Year. Other things coming up, information literature is one coming up today with the klaxon of fake news. Looking at the literature, when information literacy was first introduced in press and governmental scholarship, it was talked about as a way to increase more private enterprise into the field of producing content, which seems very antithetical to how we think about librarians using information literacy today. The 2015 ALA framework is very much about a community of learners creating things. In 1974 we’re saying we need third party business and entrepreneurial business in this space. Why do I ask that? Well there’s a dissonance there. If we have this assumption that information literacy is good, even if we mean it to be good when we say it, if the history doesn’t necessarily match up with that, maybe what we’re promoting isn’t doing what we want it to do. Our maximum effort is not producing the maximum results.

**KL:** Okay, so that’s fascinating and I feel like I have to tell our listeners, you’ve connected to a couple of earlier episodes there too, John Nychka’s episode where he talks about failure. So I think that’s kind of an interesting point, and talks about reframing failure, because we are not always thinking about it in the ways that we should, especially around research. And also Steve Lewandowski’s episode, which talks about skepticism. And we tied in with a discussion about critical thinking. So you’re kind of ringing all the bells there in terms of what you’re talking about. But I also want to talk a little bit about the responsibilities when you are a critical scholar. And you’ve talked, I think, about one of them, which is really clearly defining terms and situating what your criticism is within a context within a discourse. I’m wondering if you can talk about other kinds of responsibilities, both to the thing you’re being critical of and to the audience that’s reading that criticism when you’re using critical methodologies in your work.

**RM:** I’m very glad you asked that question. In this kind of—I use a post-modern and often post-structuralist framework in what I do, and I’m very upfront with that. The reason being this idea of truth with a capital “T” is something that I am not willing to subscribe that we have localized truths and localized narratives with a lower case “t,” but that my social science is, you know, above reproach and ubiquitous is false. So in thinking about that, I have to do a great job when providing criticism of failure, so to speak. Like I mentioned, the Swiss tennis player Stan Wawrinka, and that quote means something to him, and that quote means something to a lot of people. Beckett may have had a reason that he wrote *Worstward Ho*, and looking at his scholarship it is fair to say that the manner in which he was approaching failure is different than how the failure museum in Europe has thought about it today. But the genesis of that, that this has happened over 80 years, we have to respect that, that there are these multiple meanings. And so I am providing a point of reference for people who are maybe are saying “Okay, I’m hearing this, it makes a lot of sense, it passes the smell test.” I am trying to say “Well, the smell test might not be the only test we want to put on this.” If this word has meaning for you, fantastic, but you have to think about how it applies to other spaces. So it is important to be fair to those we are being critical of. For example, I am right now, my title is the Director of Academic Innovation, which is somewhat ironic because my scholarship on innovation is usually very critical. I take a historical look at a word that, throughout most of history, has been either ambivalent or pejorative, but innovation has moved a lot of funding and positive thinking in education over the last decade. So when being critical of that term, I need to be fair to those people and those places where it’s being used in earnestness. Whether that’s the United States government, both President Obama and President Trump have utilized innovation to talk about making change for a sort of social progress, and there is money that has gone behind that, and we need to understand that those intentions, it’s not Ned Beatty and net worth in a wood paneled room saying you are messing with the primal forces of nature. We have this idea that we want to make improvement, so making sure that I am fair to those that I am critical of and I am a perspective, and I am a well-reasoned perspective, but there is room for disagreement. And that is important for the audience as well, because I need people who are reading to know that this is one perspective, and another perspective is welcome and should be brought in, and that I am promoting a critical work, I have no false thinking that there’s not going to be criticism of that. So I mentioned information literacy. About five months ago I published an essay in Real Life magazine that was, I don’t want to say against information literacy, but it brought to question this idea that information literacy was in and of itself a solution force. And I used Evgeny Morozov’s *Technological Solutionism* as a framework to look at how we are applying information literacy as kind of a hooray concept and got into the library research on that. To discuss, we’ve been doing this for 40 years and we see a lot of success on paper, but we continue to talk about having the need to teach it, and teach it more, and teach it better. It was very important for that audience to understand that this was not critical of libraries, critical of museums, critical of educational structures, but that this was trying to frame a question around a topic that we were just kind of pushing in, saying “Well, here’s what education’s going to do, we’re going to do information literacy and that will solve the problem, and maybe we won’t have these geopolitical upheavals like have happened in the last 18 months. The balance there is that if you are trying to get people to read, you want to be somewhat provocative. So how do you entice people and have those in the world of social media, have those things that can be tweeted, have those paragraphs that can go out and can be highlighted, along with understanding that the people working in that field are, by and large, doing hard, strong, important work, and what I am saying is not critical of that work. And that’s a fine balance. In that article in particular, there was some upset. The American Library Association used it as their article of the day, and that had some librarians not happy about—saying that I was unfair to what they were doing. And so how do you balance that, making sure that everybody has a voice, but yet still making sure that it is just my one voice making a criticism and please, please share yours.

**KL:** I like the idea of opening up the conversation, and like you’re saying and really clarifying that this is where you’re coming from, this is your perspective, here is the evidence to back this up, here is the context with which you are making that argument, but you welcome dialogue. You welcome other people’s response.

**RM:** And that’s, to do that then you want to be able to do that in a way that you can make an enjoyable read. That it’s going to be informative and it’s going to have resonance, but you can’t do that at the expense of somebody. So I think we were talking about MOOCs earlier. So Sebastian Thrun, who is at Udacity, he was at Google, one of the pioneers of the driverless car, he said that in 50 years there will only be 10 universities. And that has been widely bandied about and poked fun at because that prediction seems very false, especially the way that he promoted it, but we have to think about the context in which he said that and what he was doing. And he has himself apologized for making such a statement and understanding that I might not think the MOOC is the solution, but it is wrong of me to put all of the onus on Sebastian Thrun making a statement that he probably today thinks is throwaway at a conference. There are a lot of those examples, especially in the field of social media, of things that were said that, when given time to reflect, people probably wouldn’t stick their flag in. Yet our responses, we build on top of that. And I think in critical scholarship we need to be much more aware of the same kind of fluidity that I was speaking about earlier.

**KL:** Absolutely. Well this gives us a nice foundation for the rest of our discussion. We are going to take a brief break. When we come back we are going to hear a little bit more from Rolin about dealing with criticism of your work. Back in a moment.

[Music]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Rolin, I would expect that since you are critical of others, you probably also deal with criticism of your own work. Can you share some examples of criticism that you have received and how you have chosen to respond?

**RM:** Absolutely. And I think to preface this it is important to note I am the benefactor of white male privilege, and the manner in which criticism hits me is remarkably different than it would hit a female, a minority, or underrepresented population. I have noticed that the criticism of my work has either been directed towards that, or very sophomoric, but not directed at my family, not directed at myself, at anything about me. It’s either just very—I don’t want to say jocular, but very base and just generally rude, or it takes a point by point. But it’s not mansplaining; it’s not those other things. I have to preface that I am quite fortunate in that and what I’m saying is particularly about the criticism that I have received, understanding where my position is in the hierarchy.

**KL:** That’s an excellent point, I’m glad you started there.

**RM:** So my first critical piece was on the failure topic, and it got picked up by Mindshift, the KQED website, and NPR actually picked up the article, which got a lot of readers, which was fantastic, and that led to a lot of the comment section. People saying “You know, here’s another person from the ivy tower telling us how it’s supposed to be, we have to give everybody a trophy, sort of engagement like that. And that was sort of my first time at this, and when I wrote that I was in a very different position. I started my career in K-12 education, and I fell in love with professional development, and so I returned to get a doctorate to focus on that. So I was actually working on my dissertation when I wrote that. So there was this fear of what is this going to mean for my growth? Are people going to read the comments and when I am applying for jobs or when I am trying to get funding this is going to come into this. And so it kind of changed the way that I approached all of my public presentations and articles at that point, because this got a big blast, but I didn’t have a way of interacting at that point. So subsequently, when I have written I have really focused on critical work being in the open. So whether that is going to be open source somewhere, like a hybrid pedagogy, or as I mentioned Real Life Magazine. Or open books, like Out of Basket Press, and then there is all sorts of good stuff out there in the open sector. So that there is, for the people who are reading, for the audience, there is this understanding that it is I am not protecting myself behind anything, that this is out there and in the open, and my hope is that you will engage as well. I try my hardest not to directly engage the flame war, so to speak. The sophomoric stuff you try and let roll off your back. When a comment comes, when there is a chance to wrestle around a concept I am more than happy to do that, and I try to encourage people to respond in some fashion. And in keynotes and presentations that I’ve given, I will often do a recap of that as a blog, and then encourage people to post comments, post their own blogs, and get one of those conversations going that made the internet of the first decade of the century what it was, what got many of us excited about being in educational technology.

**KL:** So I would imagine that when you’re getting this criticism, and especially when it’s on the internet and people can post anonymously, and social media and all these different kinds of things, and you mentioned kind of not engaging in the flame wars, I’m wondering how you differentiate between the pieces of criticism you might receive that might actually be effective feedback and influential for your work, and if there’s criticism that you just kind of turn away from and you’re like “Nope, not going to go there.” How do you kind of parse that out and really engage with the pieces that you find valuable? Do you have a set of criteria that you’re looking to to help you make those delineations?

**RM:** That’s a great question. When somebody’s making that sophomoric argument of oh here’s—when they are making the argument that is themselves responding. So the comment section, so to speak, where I am posting a comment in and of itself is going to be a projection, but not my engagement with the article. So in those cases that’s where things get ignored, where there’s an insult that’s thrown and the—I don’t want to say takeaways—but the components of the piece were not engaged in that response. That this response was a way for someone to, you know, move up their cloud score. And I think that the comment section is very difficult to work on when you’re working on something that is public facing. So like Mindshift or a magazine, it is more difficult to engage there. The problem is, of course, not everybody is on social media and not everyone has a forum to engage beyond that. So you find the conversations happening in backchannels on twitter, somebody will forward a link saying hey, you know, Rolin wrote this so read it, blah blah blah, and then the feed of that. So those are the places that I have found myself jumping into if I find that somebody is bringing criticism. And I really work hard that my jumping in is not defensive, but trying to either illuminate a point that I was making and bring that into the context, or let the person know that I appreciated that. So I mentioned that the information literacy piece that I wrote, which had a not necessarily positive response from some working in libraries and information services, and in those spaces a lot of the criticism was I didn’t directly address the 2015 framework and how that had changed things. And so I noted in there that was true, I did not address that, but the reason I didn’t address that was for a, b, and c. So that allowed those individuals who were providing their critique to either say okay, I felt like you were being unfair to librarians, or to say, that understood, you missed a, b and c. A great point that came out was a philosopher that I had quoted and somebody said, “Well when you quote that philosopher that philosopher is historically known for being anti-educational institutions, so you’re bolstering your attack using a straw man rather than actually having something that resonates. If I had used Habermas, for example, this person said that might have had a better case. That was a fantastic quote to have, and it took that moment of this didn’t exist, me explaining why that didn’t exist, and then moving to the next space. It’s difficult to do that, and one of the things I think fails us in academia is we reward ourselves for our successes, yet we talk about how we’re supposed to have these teachable moments. So if I am doing my job as a critical scholar or as a keynote, it’s those moments where I create a two-way conversation and a dialogue and we have some artifacts that are built out of that. That’s the real value, not, you know, I just had 20,000 hits and 100 likes on Facebook and some circulation on LinkedIn. And that’s tough to do. And like you mentioned, how do you choose the metrics on how you’re supposed to do that, and how many people are lost because of the platform you choose. And I use Twitter exclusively to do that. I don’t use Facebook that way and I don’t use it that way on Instagram. I hope that we can do better with how we think about, in academia, how we think about our conferences and our value in these things so that these conversations can happen. If we want two-way communication and transmission and reception to go in both directions, we have to create the spaces for that, and I don’t see that in today’s landscape too often,

**KL:** Yeah I think one of the things that you’re raising, which is very interesting, is part of this question I think it disciplinary because I think about different conferences I’ve gone to, and in some disciplines it seems like people are just there to rip each other to shreds. They’re trying to pull people down in terms of their arguments, and not always in a nice way, and not always in a friendly critiquing way. But then there are other conferences I’ve been to where the keynote really does seem to be one way. It’s meant to just kind of translate information and that’s it. It’s a transmitting tool, that’s all it is. But I think what I want to dig into that you’re talking about here is the culture of the internet, because I think one of the pieces of engagement that you’re referring to quite a bit is engagement online and how people are referring to your work, commenting on your work, tweeting about your work in online spaces, and I think the culture of the internet it can be anonymous, it can be a space that is not always friendly to academics, and I think a lot of academics are concerned about engaging on the internet for good reason. I think about John Ronson’s recent book *So You’ve Been Publically Shamed,* which is a good example of this, that the internet is used as a shaming tool. So I’m wondering if you can speak to that. I know it’s a big topic, but when you think about engaging in social media and being a critical scholar, how are you doing that? What does that look like for you? What concerns does that raise? And obviously you’re overcoming it and engaging anyway. So tell us more.

**RM:** Thinking about the book you just mentioned, I was in a conversation just the other day where it was said that the only field in which someone can gain a social media following for being positive and embracing is academia. I think specifically education technology. And at the time it resonated and then Katie and I were discussing during the break, that is not necessarily the experience most people are having. So I am fortunate that the internet that I came into as a scholar was that very open armed embrace of what was going on. People first started paying attention to what I did because I wrote a criticism of George Siemen’s Connectivism essay with Stephen Downs, and George retweeted it, and that put me on the map as someone. And kudos to him for taking somebody who was really writing at that point to synthesize for myself and using publishing as a way to make sure that I was being formal and thoughtful as a way of practice. But that was a great experience, and that shaped the way that I like to think about the web. The way I think about the web isn’t necessarily the web that we all live in. So it’s the same sort of thing. If I am presenting at a conference, and it’s different when doing specific professional development and you have a specific takeaway that you are looking for, that’s a whole different roster. But when you are thinking about presenting research or delivering a keynote, I embrace, I found that I kind of have to, but it also fits the critical style of if I am going to be a critic, people have to be free to criticize me. And if somebody is going to say that the future is innovation, and I am going to stick on that hmm, what is the past of innovation? I have to be willing to let others do the same thing. That I could give a 90 minute presentation and it’s going to be a 20 second byte that someone is going to take and expand. And that might have been, to me, a throwaway, but that is where they are going to stick. So what I found myself doing in every talk that I give is I find myself talking about connervation. The urban planning definition of when you can’t tell the difference between residential commerce and industry, and they just kind of flow together. So living in the Pacific Northwest, going between Seattle and Tacoma. Today, you’ll suddenly have residential, then industrial, then commercial, then industrial, then residential, and suddenly you’re in Tacoma. And there wasn’t a break and it all kind of starts to look the same. And more and more these pockets are growing across the United States. And I say that, in part, to let people know that it’s not a linear progression anymore. That you start in Seattle and suddenly you’re going to be in Tacoma and you might not have realized when you passed through the different small towns, but you’re here. So you’ve gotten here and hopefully you’ve taken some things away with that. And that is how I have to give talks and presentations at this point. There is going to be a backchannel, and that backchannel is going to go in different directions and I am going to, you know, write a critical piece and people might focus on a specific part that to me was color or was just a small step to make a much bigger point. I have to give people that same opportunity and affordance to work with that. And so I found that the best way to do that is to be direct with it and embrace that and encourage those moments when it happens. I mean I got into education and it’s all, whether it’s educating students, educating educators, educating a large group of people around a topic that you have been asked kindly enough to present on, everyone is going to take away something different. Hopefully I have three fundamental points that they will understand, and from there let’s find where the dissonance was, and where the parts of their environments came into play. That’s the real awesome stuff about education, not that someone can recite specifically what I said in a criticism.

**KL:** I think my favorite thing about what you are saying now is the relationship I can draw between that philosophy and teaching in the classroom. We have to give our students the freedom to learn and do the work, and we are not always going to have control over how they choose to do that. In the same vein, it’s the same with our audiences. We are not always sure how they’re going to take up our messages, but we have to give some freedom to allow that dialogue to happen. So Rolin, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show, share about your work, and share about what it means to you to be a critical scholar. Thank you.

**RM:** Thank you for having me, Katie.

**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 another episode.

[Outro music]

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for Episode 76 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Rolin Moe shares his recommendations for other researchers for how to deal with criticism of their research – take a listen.

**KL:** Rolin, given your experiences, I’m wondering what recommendations you have for other researchers who are dealing with criticism of their work?

**RM:** So I want to preface this by noting that as a critical scholar, as somebody who would say that I employ critical theory in the work that I’m doing, that is asking for criticism by how I would define it. Again, it is all lower case t’s. For those who are doing the same thing, there needs to be an understanding that putting that lens on it is an invitation, and so being fair to both the group that you are bringing that critique—and again, critique is not a negative—but also fair to the audience, and making sure that they are at an understanding by the end of it that you have created an argument and not a truth. That’s the most important thing that you can do in the publication process. The next part, and again my experience is going to be very different from many people who are criticized and trolled on the internet, when it comes to very specific academic criticism that we are taking the nuts and bolts of a piece and saying I disagree with this, I really work to embrace that and encourage that coming out. And how can that become an artifact of its own? So George Siemens sending out a critique of an essay I wrote about his created opportunities. Now when we move up in the ranks of scholarship our works get more reads. What are the opportunities for us to engage with new scholars and help them who are making those criticisms, whether we agree with them or not. If they build a solid foundation and make a valid point, how can we support that? I think that’s the direction that we want to go in. But again, it’s a very touchy subject when you talk about criticism on the internet, because criticism in an academic sense is very different criticism in social media. And so when it comes to, I don’t feel like I have the right to discuss policies on handling trolling or threats or any person attacks. I have been very fortunate that the personal attacks were generic in the work that I have done. “You’re stupid.” Nothing that has ever come after anything specific about me or my family or anything culturally surrounding my identity. So I have the privilege of functioning in a different space because of that, and I hope that the work that I have seen others do and the work that I am trying to do now creates more of that internet so those places can exist and we can grow the field, rather than this kind of heaping of trollism that seems pervasive in 2017.

**KL:** Absolutely. Well thanks so much for sharing your perspectives.

**RM:** Thank you.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 76 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Rolin Moe sharing his recommendations for other researchers for how to deal with criticism of their research – thanks for listening!