Episode 77: Valerie Clayman Pye

# KL: Katie Linder

# VP: Valerie Clayman Pye

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

# [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, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode I'm joined by Valerie Clayman Pye, an assistant professor of theater in the School of Performing Arts at LIU Post where she teaches acting, voice, and speech. She holds a Ph.D. in performance practice drama and an MFA in staging Shakespeare from the University of Exeter where she worked with Shakespeare's Globe and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Valerie's research focuses on actor training pedagogy, facilitating performances of heightened text, and on practice as research.

She writes about the intersection between text and performance and on the dynamics of performance at Shakespeare's Globe. Her article *Shakespeare's Globe: Theatre Architecture and the Performance of Authenticity* was recently named one of the most read articles in the journal Shakespeare in the last three years. She also holds an MFA in acting from Brooklyn College. Valerie is a professional actor and director whose work has reached audiences in over 20 countries. As a voice and speech coach, Valerie has worked in theatre, film and television coaching Academy, BAFTA, Emmy and Golden Globe Award nominees. Her book, *Unearthing Shakespeare: Embodied Performance in the Globe*, was released by Routledge in January 2017.

**KL**: Thanks so much for joining me on the show today Valerie.

**VP:** Thanks for having me Katie. I'm really excited to be here.

**KL:** So I'm excited too, because we're talking about a topic that is new for the show and really new to me as well; practice as research. So why don't we start out with just a brief definition of that what - what is it? How would you define it?

**VP:** Well practice as research is also sometimes known as practice-led research or practice-based research. Sometimes there is a little bit of regional distinction although they tend to mean the same thing, which essentially is that some form of creative practice is at the core of the research endeavor. There are some differences between practice-led research and practice-based research, although the terms are interchangeable very often. So for example practice led research could be projects that have queries or theories that emerge through practice, right? Through moments of creative practice. Whereas practice-based research can be research that is tested through practice, right? So you begin with the theory and you have a theory that needs to be investigated through moments of practice. So practice can either be the vehicle by which research is undertaken or it can be the inciting moment of inquiry as well, so those can float back and forth, and they're kind of a little bit of a chicken and an egg situation in that regard.

**KL:** Alright, so you've mentioned the term creative practice in that definition, so can you go into that a little bit as well? What exactly do you mean by creative practice?

**VP:** Yes, okay. So I'm a theater practitioner, and I should probably preface this conversation by saying that the type of practice as research I'm most familiar with has to do with theatrical practice, but it can be forms of creative practice such as performance making, it can be fine art making, it can be creative writing. I'm sure that there are distinctions in those fields as well, but obviously I'm most able to talk about my own field.

**KL:** Ok so let's talk about how you came to focus on this and your work, and maybe that'll help us get intel so some concrete examples for people who might want to hear a little bit more about, “okay, So what does this mean exactly?” So how did you come to this?

**VP:** So I began my career as an actor and out of that I began coaching other actors and so my background was really as a practitioner. And as I began to become more and more interested in career as an academic and as someone who helps to facilitate others process, I was really drawn to the practice as research degree because it really was something that enabled me to use all of my skills. you know, the practice as research is relatively young in terms of degrees and in terms of areas of inquiry, probably you know beginning to emerge in the late 1990’s and really taking shape at the turn of the 2000’s and early 2000’s, which is when I began my work. And I think that, you know prior to that, there was really a divide between theory and practice, so if you are interested in going on to pursue a Ph.D.—particularly in theater, there was really those degrees were theoretically based and really didn't have a whole lot of room for practice. There had been, you know, a great divide between practitioners in the academy, and theoreticians, and historians in the academy. And you know I would say probably in the last 20 or so years that's, that's been slowly merging and starting to come together in terms of having more of a blend and finding more practitioners who are also scholars—scholar practitioners as I am. And so being able to use practice as a means for broadening the scope of my own areas of inquiry was really appealing to me, and you know it's interesting because in in many ways, I think that having theory behind the practice we do is not necessarily anything new and theorizing moments of practice is not necessarily new. You know, for example, I think in my own discipline Konstantine Sensaki who basically changed the ways in which we trained actors in the western world at the turn of the 20th century was essentially codifying his moments of practice and creating theory out of that which then informed the next hundred plus years of how we look at actor training in the West. For the most part. And so you know that's not necessarily new but, the ability to embark on uh an area of inquiry where practice and theories really implicated on informing one another, and not necessarily in these kind of very clean contained moments of separated modes of inquiry, but really being able to, for example in my field, performance is really multimodal, right? So to be able to take that and use that as a means for exploring different things within the field I found very appealing.

**KL**: So it sounds to me, I mean I'm wondering if one kind of connection we could make to this for listeners who are coming to this for the first time, is it sounds in some ways a little bit like mixed methods. Where you're taking two things that have previously been distinct and combining them in a way to kind of further your inquiry. It sounds very meta, it sounds very kind of reflective.

**VP:** Yes, Absolutely! Absolutely. It’s very meta. I mean metacognition, meta-reflection is at the heart of everything in practice as research and having the reflexive practice is at the core of everything in practice as research, and I think that practice as research also has lots of other fields at its periphery, you know? And for some researchers I'm sure they're more central than others. So for example philosophy comes in quite a lot, auto ethnography comes in quite a lot and being able to analyze and record how you are documenting what is happening at a given time with a group of people, and so it is very meta. Definitely.

**KL:** So I'm curious if we can talk a little bit about - and I think you've gotten into this, we're starting to go in this direction, some of the methodologies of practices research, and what are some of the ways that scholars are kind of engaging in this in a very practical way? You know, what are the kinds of things they're doing to engage in practices research?

**VP:** Mhm. Well I mean obviously there's an - it’s qualitative in nature obviously, and looking at both basic and applied and experimental modes of research, right? Because you've got - you’ve got a creative background that you are bringing you know the tacit knowledge of the practitioner, right? This embodied knowledge that you're bringing to research endeavor, but also have all of the theoretical, contextual, historical information that is in dialogue with that tacit knowledge. and so it's really important we’re just talking about reflexive practice, and it's really important to have a very finely tuned sense of reflective practice in that you've got to go back and forth between - you never know what is important while you're in the moment of practice, right? Because you're kind of you’re doing what’s shown you know identifies and reflective practice as being reflections in as well as reflections on practice rights, so is this is something that you know it comes up in other fields as well for example nursing is one of them right? Where you you've got to be thinking on your feet and responding to what's happening in the moment, responding to the stimulus of what's around you and then as it settles your also reflecting on your reflections while you were in it, and how you were responding to those kind of in real time and over the course of the research project dependent on how long that is you know those can be quite great, you know? If you are you've got all these smaller moments of reflection on kind of daily or an ongoing basis, but then you've got this kind of matter of flexion on how you use an have to contextualize, theorize what was happening in those moments of practice as you are undertaking them. So for example it might be easier if I talk about one of you know an example from my own work, which is, you know, having an experience in performance and being able to say, “Why do I think that this particular moment was unlike another moment? What kinds of things does that spark for me as a researcher in terms of what other practitioners have done? What's my body of work that this particular event or this particular moment that has sparked my interest? How does this fit with the existing body of knowledge in the field?” and then from there you begin to develop some further questions, and say “Okay, well I have this particular experience what might that mean? Who else is working in this way? How can I really get to the core of what this moment might mean and what the implications are for that elsewhere for other practitioners?” um Yeah.

**KL:**  Interesting as you describe this. It's really reminded me a lot of how we describe scholarship of teaching and learning. When you're studying your own practice as a teacher or as a faculty member in the classroom, I mean typically it comes from one moment where you're like “Why did that happen that way, or why did they respond that way, or what's the obstacle here to the learning?” And it is very similar to some of the things that you're describing here.

**VP:** It is, it absolutely is, and I think a lot of that is because you know and you might not know when that occurs, right? Like you're in a teaching moment, you're in the middle of a lecture or a class or whatever, and you have that aha moment, right? and then you begin to think about it later, and then you do a little bit of research about what you know what might already exist in the field about that particular observation that you have, and then maybe you have, you know, a theory that you want to test about that observation based on the research that you've done and so then you come back into the classroom and you begin to implement some of those things that you've been thinking about, and it’s very much like that with performers and with practice as well. Where you have this moment and, and I think that's part of the reason why there had been previously such a divide between practitioners and theoreticians in the academy, because practice for practitioners was always considered the research, right? And because you never knew what those moments would produce and what you would learn in that tacit experience, the tacit knowledge, and the embodied knowledge of the doing. You know there's some great examples, for example I think about um, and I'll talk about Robin Nelson's work later, but Robin nelson who I consider kind of the godfather, the grandfather of practice as research; he gives an example from the Philosopher David Pears, who talks about you know the riding bicycle, right? And when you're riding a bicycle, and you know I might be paraphrasing this so forgive me, but when you're riding a bicycle you are testing all of those laws of balance and knowledge, which you can have an intellectual understanding about you know the physics of how to do it. It doesn't necessarily mean that you can get on the bike and ride, right? And so you, and conversely you can ride a bicycle without having any of the theoretical knowledge of you know the mechanics behind what makes that process and so I think at the heart of practice as research, we're trying to understand both things, and that's why I think it has such an important position in the academy right now. Is because it gives us this kind of melded sense between how things are done in practice and the understanding of why that is so.

**KL:** Well Valerie I feel like we're just scratching the surface on this. We're going to take a brief break, when we come back we'll hear a little bit more about practice as research. Back in a moment.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Valarie, one of the things you talked about in segment one that was really interesting to me was we started kind of think about the range of disciplines where this might be of interest and nursing was mentioned, we also talked a little bit about scholarship of teaching and learning and then of course your own background in theater, so I'm wondering if their particular disciplines where you see this practice more? Clearly there's a wide range of possibilities here, but are there particular places where we're seeing more publications with practices research, or we're seeing it kind of pop up more than other places.

**VP:** Well, I think I can certainly say that it has in the last fifteen years really emerged in not only in theater but in the dance world, there has been some emergence in terms of performance art and some fine art as well. Part of the reason I actually became aware of the nursing was in my own research to deepening my understanding of reflect reflexive practice so that I could use that to the best of my ability and make sure that I was really interrogating my own moments of practice in - in a really dynamic and cohesive way, and so a lot of, as I was looking into reflexive practice, a lot of what did come up really was focused on nursing and teaching as we said and less so for practitioners, but I think that it's been changing in, you know, the last couple of years this seems to be a lot more scholarship emerging at the moment about practice as research and how to go about doing that, and I think that in that helps to indicate the shift that we're undergoing as practitioners in the academy.

**KL**: So I want to play a little bit of a devil's advocate here because I can just imagine some of our listeners thinking, “What do publications like this look like?” you know, in terms of peer review, because it's kind of an end of one situation where you're building sometimes out of your own experience and sure you're making connections to other things, but I can imagine that some people might be a little bit skeptical about you know what can we really learn you know from an individual's experience. Can you speak to that a little bit, and what does it look like in terms of publishing on this kind of methodology in your field or another fields that you've looked at?

**VP:** Well, I think the key is to avoid exclusively presenting it as a first-person narrative right that just doesn't fly. It needs moments of practice really need to be contextualized within strong theoretical base of what you know almost looking at the landscape of practice the same way that someone might do for example a literature review. You might get a review of practice or practitioners in order to best situate how this particular moment or this particular example lies within an entire landscape with of research inquiry. I think that having your research objectives really clearly stated being able to contextualize the reflections that you've done in a non-practice, in a theoretical way that ties in not only theory from your own field, but existing phenomenology or some kind, it depends on the project obviously, but being able to do that and also to be able to place whatever the practice is in its appropriate creative and cultural contacts, I think is also very important, because you're right; it would not fly. Not at all. If it was, you know, a little bit of “I directed this play, and here's how we did it.” That is not - that's not scholarly inquiry, although directing that play and the particular way that you did it may have incited you know a very profound research query, but then that needs to be followed up with that query to textualize within that broader scope of scholarship.

**KL:** So I'm curious if there are specific practice as research journals, or if this is something that's kind of embedded within a lot of different disciplinary journals as just one more methodology. Is there a specific focus of their publications we can point people too if they want to follow up and look at this more?

**VP:** You know I have not found one or any particular journals at the moment. If there are any out there, please send him my way listeners, but I haven't found any journals that are exclusively dedicated to practice as research. There are many journals that I can mention for example in theater that I know use practice as research, so *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, *Theatre Topics, Theatre Survey* for example, um *Performance Research* is another Journal that definitely looks at practice as research. But what I'm finding is that more and more practice as research is finding homes in a range of disciplines specific to journals because of the contextualization within theoretical context.

**KL:** Okay, so I know you've also trained and done your scholarly practice in other countries, and so I'm also curious, to what degree practice as research is being utilized in the U.S versus in other countries. Can you speak to that a little bit?

**VP:** Sure, you know it's very, very young in the U.S compared to what it is abroad both in the U.K and in Europe. Part of that, I think is related to the difficulty that we have with arts funding and so on. So there are a few doctoral programs that now have practice as a component of research, but for example you know, I think they're relatively young. When I began my doctoral work I did not find any programs like the one that I did in the U.S, which is part of the reason why I was abroad, but I think that we are beginning to catch up. I think that in terms of academics who are practitioners in the academy there are more and more demands on the evidence of scholarly evidence of the work that we do and so that that therefore lends itself to a natural fit to expanding the options, but you know in the United States the MFA degree, the master of fine arts degree, has been the terminal degree for artists and practitioners and this this new emergence of practitioner scholars and the demands of the academy are really beginning to ask where the role of practice lies for the Ph.D. in the field, and so I think that that it is emerging, but we are very far behind in the U.S. Very far behind.

**KL:** That's really fascinating. I mean I can imagine that some people hearing this are intrigued, and I mean I'm certainly intrigued and I think that I'm wondering if some people are hearing it and thinking you know, “Well, that sounds kind of like an easy way into scholarship.” You know, because it's based in your own experience, and you know I think sometimes people think this way about qualitative to like, “Qualitative is easy! You just you know go out and talk to some people and reflect on it.” And we know that it’s actually quite a bit harder than that and actually when I hear you describing this I all I can think about is “This sounds really hard.” So I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about you know certain pitfalls or common issues that people need to watch out for if they're kind of just getting started with this, you know what are some of the areas that are particularly complicated?

**VP:** Absolutely, I mean first if I can I'd love to dispel that the myth of the Ph.D. light in the practitioner, because you know I can talk about my own experience and what my dissertation was like, which ultimately resulted in a hundred thousand words, and I think minimum of 12 edited DVDs of you know years of practice. So it certainly is not, I do a couple of performance pieces, and I write about them, and I have a Ph.D., because it's not - it's almost in many ways like doing two dissertations. You have an entire body of practice that you are editing as if you're a film editor, you know creating DVDs and learning all of the technology in order to do that and, and also having, you know, essentially completely written dissertation that is as waiting and as long as you know perhaps any other so I would say the big thing in terms of pitfalls is being really clear why practice is integral to the project? It’s very, very important. Really knowing why you need the moment of practice in order to compliment the written work, right? Because the written were really also needs to stand on its own, so the big question is why or how the practice does complement the written work? And also I think In terms of the pitfalls really to be clear about the documentation about the degree of reflexivity being able to hone those skills even if you need to do that independently because you may not necessarily have that at your disposal when you begin, but you will quickly learn how important it is to be able to have those reflections on and reflections in documented. And I think you know the big thing is making sure that you can draw the line and connect the pieces of practice to as I said earlier the broader landscape of theoretical—the theoretical base within the field. That’s important. I think the specificity is also key being able to take, you know, as an auto ethnographer would being able to take all of these observations and create theory from those observations is really key. You know to avoid that - that narrative sense of we did this and then we did that and this this choice worked or this choice didn't work, but without any of the interrogation because you really need to have that foundation and that core.

**KL:** So it seems like there's such a rich combination of skills being brought to bear with practice as research, and I'm wondering if there is an entry point that you might recommend for someone who's thinking about this and thinking, “I’m intrigued. I'm curious. I want to start thinking about this.” You know is it something like journaling, or you know is there some other way to kind of start to tap into the more reflective component of this or the more you know connecting to those theoretical elements. What would you recommend for someone who wants to kind of start to dip their toe into this?

**VP:** Well. I think I would recommend journaling. I think that journaling is really important, but I think that you also have to have the meta-reflection about the journaling, and I think you know I know Danelle Stevens was on the podcast and that would be a great thing for listeners to go back to because her book is so brilliant and the way that she discusses how to do that is an excellent place to start I would say even before listener began to journal they should read that book. That would be my recommendation, but also really say if you're in if you're intrigued about practice as research I would certainly look at the work of Robin Nelson. His essay “Practice as Research on the Problem of Knowledge” can you know we can link to these in the arts John Freeman's book *Blood Sweat and Theory:* *Research through Practice and Performance* is really key. I think, you know, what's also very interesting is that there had been a five-year, I believe It was a five-year project called PARIP which was Practice as Research in Performance which was undertaken I believe it around the early two thousands at the University of Bristol, and there was a five-year study about this, and there's a lot of documentation about how that project went and so that's really great way to have a look at how this type of work is situated within a broader research landscape, I would make that recommendation. And you know cognitive science also, I'm sorry, I'm going back to that's another field that's really on the periphery of their search and being able to understand contextualized you know the field of cognitive science is really beginning to go very deeply into these moments of practice, and there's so you know if you have these foundations of understanding it's a really great launching point, but if there are practitioners who are interested in in building out into you know expanding their work to be more research-based. I would look at the work of Robin Nelson and John Freeman and have a greater understanding of how to take these moments and cultivate them in a way that you can begin to ask those broader theoretical questions.

**KL:** Alright well, this is such a fascinating introduction to this topic of practice as research. It's been so wonderful to talk with you, Valerie. Thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and share about your experience.

**VP:** Thanks so much for having me.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of Research and Action. I'm Katie Linder and will be back next week with another episode.

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# Bonus Clip #1:

**KL:** In this first bonus clip for Episode 77 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Valerie Pye shares an example of practice-as-research – take a listen.

Valerie, I think it could be really beneficial to our listeners to hear about a specific from your own experience of practice-as-research. Do you have one you can share?

**VP:** Oh, absolutely. So, when I was doing some practical research as part of my MFA in Stage and Shakespeare at the Globe, I had an experience in that space where the audience and the actor are in shared light. That, as I was describing the experience, I called it the “use of elliptical energy” where the actors are using kind of a loop of energy that is including the audience in order to reach the partners on stage. And so, I began to interrogate that one kind of “aha” moment that came through practice and began to theorize exactly what was happening in terms of the actor-audience relationship. And part of that work became the core of the training methodology that is in my most recent book and that became fuel to a whole bunch of other moments of practice-as-research. So, I had this moment, I had theorized it, and then I began to question, “well, how can we then train other actors to have this experience if they’ve never been on this particular stage with this particular experience?” And so I began to look at the work of other practitioners and I began to create training exercises and a methodology for training actors based on that and testing that through practice. “Do these exercises work? How do they work? How does the actor respond to this? Is it repeatable? Does it give the intended outcome that the research question is querying?” Right? And so, that now, as a result of that, there is a whole series of exercises that exist that were inspired by moment-of-practice, theorized, tested through practice and um exist—and other teachers are using them and other actors are being trained in that way.

**KL:** It sounds very cyclical as your talking about. It comes from practice, but it is also tested through practice.

**VP:** Yes—it informs one another. That’s what I think is so wonderful about this particular type of scholarship that you have all of these moments where, you know, one thing leads to the next and then another, another thought is inspired another query happens, and you just you may not necessarily know what's coming around the corner, but you have to be open to the possibility.

**KL:** Wonderful. Thanks so much for sharing this experience.

**VP:** Thank you.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 77 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Valerie Pye sharing an example of practice-as-research – thanks for listening!

# Bonus Clip #2:

**KL:** In this second bonus clip for Episode 77 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Valerie Pye defines the word reflexive and talks about how it is used in her research – take a listen.

**KL:** Valerie, one of the words that you've used that I think might not be super familiar to all of our listeners is the word reflexive, and I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about it, and how it is kind of connected to your work as practices research?

**VP:** Sure. So, reflexive is really about the type of reflection that happens kind of subconsciously within the body of knowledge that you carry as a practitioner so that you are really reflecting in the moment and it differ from reflection which would happen afterwards so having a moment of reflexive response is kind of having what we would call in in the theater of being in the moment, right? You're in the moment, and you're responding to the stimulus around you, you bring all of your body of knowledge as a practitioner to making the decisions in those responses, but that it's happening without necessarily thinking about. How you wish to respond for example, and then you can reflect on the reflexive work later.

**KL:** And maybe ask the question of why did I respond that way? What was it about my knowledge or expertise that led to that reflexive action and kind of probe that a little bit later

**VP:** Exactly, and that's how you tie it back into Theory because that gives you the platform in which to contextual eyes the work. Right that's how you create that cycle of going deeper into how, how to interrogate those moments of practice so that they can become a scholarly inquiry.

**KL:** Excellent. Thanks for the clarification.

**VP:** Thank you.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 77 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Valerie Pye defining the word reflexive and talking about how it is used in her research – thanks for listening!