Episode 98: Bonnie Stewart

# KL: Katie Linder

**BS:** Bonnie Stewart

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

# [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.

**KL:** On today’s episode I am joined by Dr. Bonnie Stewart, an educator and social media researcher fascinated by who we are when we are online. She is the program lead and designer for experiential education at the University of Prince Edward Island and the founder and director of the media literacy initiative Antigonish 2.0. Bonnie is interested in the intersection of knowledge, technology and identity. As director of Edactive Technologies, Inc.,Bonnie keynotes and consults about digital strategy, digital pedagogy and community capacity building around the world. Bonnie’s world is centered in her capacity to find meaningful ways to work and think together. Based in participatory leadership models her research, workshops and teaching explore the changing realities of contemporary higher education. Bonnie has worked as a teacher and facilitator, online and off for more than two decades. And enjoys few things more than a lively discussion. She does her best thinking out loud on Twitter as @BonnieStewart.

Bonnie, thank you so much for joining me on the show today!

**BS**: Thanks for having me, Katie.

**KL**: So you were recommend for the show because you did some kind of innovative things with your dissertation and one of them was opening the dissertation. And when you talk about that, what do you mean? What does it mean to open the dissertation?

**BS**: For me, the process of opening the dissertation was making visual how sort of the sausage gets made, behind the scenes. So rather than just sort of saying “Oh my topic is x” in my case it was academic Twitter. And here is this beautiful finished product, I had the opportunity may be a beautiful finished product. I had the opportunity to work with colleagues in a participatory way of the dissertation because I was researching to an extent my own community a community that welcomed me in and that was very communicative about topics related to academia. And so I felt to be transparent, and in a sense, to be ethical to that community. I needed to make clear to them some of my own thought processes and open those up to them for their input, for their participatory input throughout the process. So I tried to make some of what I was planning at each step and then also what I was finding at each step available by blogging about the process. I tweeted within the scope of what was sort of fair and acceptable to share. I tweeted some of my thoughts and findings and emerging considerations and threads as I went on. I was in a really interesting situation because I wanted to look at when I went into my dissertation, I knew I wanted to look at how sort of digital networks and participatory networks—exemplified by Twitter—were shaping higher ed. What kind of implications they had for communications and prestige and influence in higher ed. And my sense was, as someone who has been engaged in the open for a fairly long time on twitter as a blogger in other platforms, was that there were implicit literacies that people were using in this spaces to understand each other, to read each other’s self-presentation and read each other’s digital identity. For lack of a better word, because I am not super comfortable with that word. But, that people were engaging with each other and making sense of each other in ways they had literacies for but did not necessarily always articulate. Even when most of these people who were engaged in the space called academic twitter. In 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, when I was designing and doing this research, a lot of people were moving into twitter. It was a very collegial space, at least within academia. So most of the academic networks and sub networks that existed on twitter were highly collegial and relatively open to new comers. Or at least this was my perception and my experience. And one, I wanted to check that experience with the experience of others, but two, I wanted to know with those who really did engage in that space? What kind of literacies were they using to make sense of people? Because a lot of them were also situated in higher ed. And I knew I know that John Millinski talks about we all learn sort of the prestige economies of our own fields and how to make sense of someone as an academic, how to read what you would call someone’s academic capital. So where have they published, where did they go to school, what is there status in the um on the job market are they an assistant professor are they a full professor, are they a sessional or an adjunct like myself. And I wanted to look at those two different ways of making sense of someone’s contribution, because my sense was that they, they didn’t completely overlap. Because I kept seeing open scholars who were still grad students or who were adjuncts or whom did not necessarily have the formal academic capital. None-the-less, have their ideas taken up and build a relative scale of influence within these kind of open academic twitter circles. And when I decided to study that community to do so without making my own thought process as visible to that community in the process, seemed like I would be closing myself off from additional valuable input. I did make it possible when I put up my call for participants, I did an ethnography. Ethnography usually involves working with a relatively small group of people. I had initially a group of fourteen participants, thirteen by the end of the study. In my sort of four months of participant observation, which was pretty intensive daily looking at how people engage, not just on twitter but primarily on twitter, and then on other platforms. And in inviting people into that research I asked them, “Would you prefer to be anonymous as in a traditional academic study or would you prefer to be visible and identified within this study?” So in the published materials, “Do you want a pseudonym—no problem—or would you prefer to be identified by your twitter handle?” And every single participant actually chose to be identified by their twitter handle. Well I for the most part in opening up my dissertation and blogging through the process and tweeting and thinking about the process did not necessarily name “Hey today I am talking to X or X said this” because I didn’t kind of what to put people on the spot or take—I didn’t want to decontextualize a larger conversation and boil it down into a single tweet and kind of call people out in that way. But I did talk about the broad themes that we were exploring and the processes I was going through and put them back out to the community that including my participates some of whom have been known to me before the research. And some of whom where entirely unknown to me before the research. And to their networks and also invite input and blog comments and tweets from other members of the network. So that I was kind of continually going through a reflective part of the process of checking my assumptions, my objectives and some of my conclusions. So that was a big part of opening it for me was just kind of basically rather than waiting for peer review. When you write the paper and then you finally open it up to your community of scholars. I wanted to have it relatively open to the community of scholars early on.

**KL**: So I can imagine that some of our listens are listening to this and getting a little bit anxious on your behalf of opening up a project early on. And I think that when we think about, I have talked on this show previously about open science and some of these other ways of opening up our scholarship and our data, and a common concern is that someone is going to come up and scoop you, you know they are going to find out what you are doing and it is going to impact you in some way, eventually, what you put out there as the outcomes of your research. And I am wondering if you can speak to that a little bit in terms of just this decision to be open about what you are doing. Do you think it is different based on the methodology? I think part of us, you have described kind of the ethnographic approach you have taken, you know, it’s hard to scope something like that. Um because of kind of the contextual pieces of what you are bringing into that and what your subjects are brining into that. But did anyone express concerns about that to you? Do you have those concerns? Especially early on in your career, in your dissertation, of putting that out there and people really knowing in some deep ways what you were working on.

**BS**: I was probably extraordinarily naïve, but I wasn’t super worried about it. I had been a practitioner with an open practice, for a long time. So I had been a blogger before I even went back to do my PhD, I have worked in higher ed for about twenty years. I was a staff member at a University, project manager and program manager who kind of blogged on the side and had built something of a network and I had a very positive network experience. In terms of building that sense of community among people that I may or may not have met face-to-face, but who are out there doing stuff. And as I went back to do my PhD that network kind of morphed into kind of more of an academic network um where I started meeting particularly other grad students. Because my program here was absolutely tiny at capacity to work in the open was hugely valuable to me because there was no one else here who was doing the kind of work I was doing, or even working in sort of the area I was working in. And while I really liked my face-to-face colleagues, my cohort which was literally the first cohort in my PhD program. I live in a small island in the Atlantic Ocean and this was the first time we had an education PhD here. And I chose to stay because I have a lot of family responsibilities and contacts here. It wasn’t a good time for me to pick up and leave and do a PhD. So I started this program. The first term there were four of us in my cohort, by Christmas there were three of us and by June I was the only one working actually in the city geographically. So even getting together with other people in my program wasn’t available to me. So having this network of people interested just broadly in higher education change and digital networks from a meta-perspective out there, gave me a cohort to learn with and also gave me people beyond my committee to learn from and I was very much mentored by people in that community. I was in a privileged position because I had this kind of long standing network presence. I had a reasonably sizable twitter account and a fair number of people in that kind of academic twitter world who were pretty good to me. So I was privileged. And relatively protected in that space, not that occasional you didn’t end up in weird situations or conflicts, but this was also twitter in a very different time. Now that’s a piece that my dissertation ended up exploring, that at the end was the period of shift that 2014 represented in terms of twitter as a public or various twitter communities as publics. And how they kind of collapsed and twitter became much more technical period. But this was before that and so recognizing the privilege that I had, but also the field that I am in as an education scholar. And it’s not a field that is characterized as much by the value of discover and kind of being first as many other fields. It’s a field where the broad narratives that people carry on about education sometimes keeps circling back for an eternity. It’s also a field were in doing ethnography within education, you are right, there wasn’t a good deal of opportunity for a scope because it’s not like somebody can come in and do a much faster ethnography. But the other piece of that though that is important to me was that I did have like I said a sizeable enough account and some visibility. That if somebody had started trying to do the same ethnography in the same field probably there is a fair amount of people including the influential people in that field who would have stood up and be like “No, that’s Bonnie’s project, here is her blog post about it, she accounted this, that’s her dissertation.” And so there was a little bit of putting a stake in the ground the open work represented as well if you have talked about something in a public space with a time stamp attached to it, it can be again in the frame of the type of work I do, difficult to suddenly come along and say that was your idea.

**KL**: Alright. Well, Bonnie, I think we are just getting started with some of these issues. We are going to take a brief break when we come back we will hear a little bit more from Bonnie about opening the dissertation’s defensive. Back in a moment!

[Music plays]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Bonnie, one of the things I know that is part of your dissertation experience is also opening the defensive and this is something that I think is probably very intriguing to people who many not know what this looks like. So I am wondering if you can share a little bit about your experience and what it looked like for you to open up your dissertation defensive.

**BS**: Sure, so I did my dissertation defensive in April of 2015. And what my program was wonderfully willing to do was to have the public presentation part of the defense be something that was lived streamed. The questions sort of the traditional I guess via in the UK sense or defense questions were still behind closed doors in my case, and that was not something that the committee was willing to open up and that was fine. But I wanted to be able to share at least the public presentation piece of my defense with kind of this broader community that a) had been part of the research participates and b) had been part of the research as audience in terms of my blog readers and folks who had engaged with some of the ideas on Twitter all along. And also just with anybody else who was kind of interested in different models of going about higher ed. The truth is the open model isn’t necessarily foreign, well I guess foreign is a funny word. It is foreign in terms of the Northern American tradition, but in continental Europe, I believe that in many countries that is actually the norm. So if you look at sort of the Norwegian or French models my understandings is that they tend to be open defenses, and I thought that given that sort of my topic focus on open practice by scholars within academia and what the implications were, that sharing some of that defense process openly just makes sense. And I was also lucky enough that my partner was willing to live stream it for me and take care of that piece. He had the technical capacity to set that up, and that it wasn’t something that I was trying to manage the live stream while also presenting. Um the tradition here at the University of Prince Edward Island, in at least many programs, is that the dissertation defense has a half hour presentation that is open to the public to family to members of the academic community to anybody that is interested and what’s to come. So the room itself is opened up. Your committee members and external are also there, but they do not ask questions for that piece, it’s for the public. And so that was the piece that we live streamed. I did the half hour presentation. I made sure I invited everybody who contributed to the research process and I tweeted openly that this is about to start and everybody was welcome to watch if they did. My understanding, I don’t remember the exact stats, I think there were at least maybe seventy-five or eighty people how were actually in the live stream and then there was video for the short period after that was up and it got watched quite a few times as well. You know, the reason I wanted to do it, and again only opened it up to some extent, so it did not open up some of the power relations that are part of the defense, because that part happened behind closed doors, right? And um I frankly, for myself actually, probably would have been okay with opening up the whole thing, had my institution or my committee been open to that. But that’s not the tradition here. To some extent I know there are many different very strongly held feelings and understanding about what that experience of the defense is. I had someone, not in my committee, but in my faculty express that they saw it as sort of an almost a sacred closed space of deep investigation between these people and not the closeness of protected, perhaps the student from embarrassment. But also built out a sense of trust between those people. To me, I didn’t necessarily see it that way. I felt trust in my extended community; I didn’t need to feel like I knew everything because I didn’t know everything. I think sometimes there is a perception that the closed doors protect junior scholars, perhaps from making mistakes in public. Making mistakes in public can actually be very consequential and so I am not suggesting that we should all be thrown out into the open—particularly if we don’t have the benefit of an established, supported network who will receive what we do, right? The open is not actually a space unpopulated by people. You need to have connections in the open to even have any communication received. And if you have relationships with those connections that are positive you are more likely to have sort of yourself received positively, even if your work and ideas are critiqued. So I think sometimes there is just a sense that the traditional analogue model of there is the those of us in the room who understand and in the traditional model were first you have the public presentation then you have the closed and deep questioning. The people who are really the experts in that area and yourself who is the new expert in that area that makes sense. Because the folks from other facilities or, you know, your grandma who came to see you or your dissertation defense may not be able to engage fully with that conversation. But what that model I think does forget is that now people may actually have deep meaningful collegial relationships with people who are outside and inviting those people in who may also have expertise in this area. Even if they are not able to speak, they are just there to listen to the conversation if could be a wonderful learning opportunity for other graduate students for faculty members who are supervising and about to go into a dissertation defense experience. The first time someone is a committee member on a graduate student’s thesis maybe the first time that committee member has been in a defense since their own. Not all academic traditions and experiences are necessarily positive in some places defenses are really quite adversarial, and sometimes even used as hazing rituals. Hopefully, not all by any means, but at the same time depending on the student ends up being vulnerable to the committee members collective understanding of what this experience should be and we tend not in most institutions to do a great deal of sort of professional development, or making explicitly what these or what can be expected, from these experiences. So, even if you talk to three different people within a small faculty you may get some very different senses of what to expect. And I think so that status quo of there needs to be this cloistered space. I simply wanted to ask the question who’s situation does that necessarily protect. Sometimes it will be the student, but sometimes it is the power relations of that are comfortable for the faculty members as well. And it keeps whole aspects of the process of becoming a scholar closed to people unit, they are kind of in the hot seat. And it also closes a lot of knowledge away from the public and so I think it would be really interested if we considered that maybe sometimes sharing these experiences. Having people able to access what happens behind these closed doors might build more potentially more respect and interest in some of the things that happen. You know the status quo doesn’t help us make a case for the value of higher ed and expert knowledge, because we tend to keep most of it from the public. Um if we, there a was tweet a couple of years ago that I remember seeing and incorporating into some of the writing that I did around this opening the dissertation. The idea that um most yeah British civil servants and politicians have no access to academic journals. That there is no automatic connection between sort of our traditions of closing knowledge away and the public who actually tend to fund a great deal of it. Increasingly in the times we live in that connection is going to be made by people and I like to see the sort of advancing of knowledge in higher ed and academia continue, continue to be funded. I would like to be able to access funding for the research I want to do, but I consider it its research that needs to be available to the public right? The exploration of “hey what does it mean that we have these digital networks and how do we communicate on them?” but oh we as academics are not going to use them as openly as we could to communicate that knowledge we found out about them. To me, the particularly with my work, there is a real cognitive discordance there. It’s my responsibility to try to publish as openly as I can, it’s my responsibility to also try to publish informally or make videos of things potentially, and um share what I am supported in finding out. And also share with grad students who are you know still kind of coming up through those ranks. Some of, at least my experience, has been not to say that it should be everyone’s experience, but I really don’t think that the dissertation should be open in all cases or any of those or any of that, but I do think it probably should be the default. That we may want to look at open communications as increasingly a part of how higher ed operates. The academic journal system that we have developed out of you know the, it was intended to be a form of open sharing. These members of the royal society, etc., etc. That was as open as you could get within the media that was available to them at the time. The media has shifted the capacity to communicate in different ways has shifted. Some of our practices have not shifted and have actually almost become bizarrely close behind sort of the pay walls of journals that no longer have to expend the paper and postage to distribute this knowledge. And those of us who work in small institutions, the one article that I actually have behind a pay wall, my university can’t access that journal. And so um I can’t even access my own work, let alone share it with other people who might be interested in it. And to me that just, as a whole system we need to be looking at. Who are our audiences for the work that we do? Um how can we potentially expand those audiences so that we can continue to make a case that research and the exploration of things is valuable?

**KL**: So Bonnie I want to pick up on this idea that you have of open as the default, and I think this is something that people might listen to with interest. And think that’s an interesting idea they maybe agree with some of the things you are saying. What are some initial steps for people who might want to start thinking about open as the default? Rather than closed as the default? For things like dissertations, research, and more generally for things like defenses. What are some initial steps they can take?

**BS**: Well I think it depends for any individual scholar who is interested in taking that step back by themselves. If they are the grad student in the situation thinking about “hey I would like to open up my dissertation,” you know they are to an extent a vulnerable population. In that situation, they might not have control or agency to necessarily make that decision. So probably the first step would be a) to explore how their institution or their faculty or their specific committee feel about it. Whether there are policies in place that preclude any of that, whether there is any advocacy that they can undertake that they might help shift that. But also, kind of suss out what the consequences would be because that may not be a hill people want to die on. It’s a difficult enough thing to do a dissertation um and the public relations of doing dissertations are so sort of cloistered and murky. In many contexts that I wouldn’t necessarily recommend that everybody just comes raging out of the gate and say “I want to do it all open,” and then discover that they perhaps taken something on that might be very threatening to senior scholars in their field. That might not be an ideal situation, but if they did get a sense that this might be a door or avenue that is possible the other thing that they would need to do would be to build some network and platforms on which to continue to engage networks of sharing. Because if you open something, but you don’t have an audience for it, I don’t think you necessarily reap the benefits. In the public sense or in the network and identity building senses. So begin, choose a platform whether you blog or you are using twitter which is a pretty fraught space these days, but still has a very reasonable academic twitter world out there in spite of some of the sort of other distractions that populate that space. You can chose who you follow on twitter. So begin to follow an academic community in your field begin to engage with an academic community in your field. Begin to build essentially an audience for the type of work you are interested in doing. Seek out mentorship, seek out connections, seek out relationships, but also what you are doing when you are doing that is creating a collection of people who kind of give a [*bleep*] about what you do. And who might be interested in “oh this is really neat I know this persons dissertation” is coming up many of us are delighted to support people through that kind of experience anyway. But if we are also oh right I know that this person’s work is about “x” and I am interested in “x” maybe I will be able to um you know cite even an early paper that comes out of that. Then you got an audience for your work. That matters in the prestige economy of scholarship. We all need citations. Um if you have people ready and waiting there to consider your work because they know what you do then you have kind of gotten a little step up on um on success in the academic world as well. But you need to decide which spaces you are going to be comfortable to do that sharing. The biggest way one of the actual findings from my research was that the way in which people behave and build those networks is just by contributing to the conversation in their field. You need to contribute to the conversation that people in your field consider themselves in. It may be different than the institutional conversation that people in your field consider themselves in. Because often the digital conversation especially if they are kind of about higher ed I any kind of meta way are often kind of a little bit ahead of where institutions are at. So you can learn a great deal just by those engagements and then you can sort of begin to give back to people and you become sort of a member of that field. Once you have some of that presence established if you are able to open up your process of dissertation you probably will have greater support through that process, you may have access to other mentors. And you may have an audience for any aspect of the defense or the artifacts of the disorientation that you are able to share.

**KL:** Bonnie, this has been so fascinating to hear about your experience of opening your dissertation, opening your defense and also some tips and strategies for people who might be interested in this as well. I want to thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing your expertise with me and our listeners.

**BS**: My pleasure, it was great to be here. Thanks Katie.

**KL**: And thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I am Katie Linder we will be back next week with another episode.

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