Episode 99: Jesse Stommel

# KL: Katie Linder

# JS: Jesse Stommel

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

# [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 am joined by Jesse Stommel, Executive Director of the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington. He is also co-founder of Digital Pedagogy Lab and Hybrid Pedagogy, a digital journal of learning, teaching and technology. Jesse is a documentary film director and teaches courses about digital pedagogy, film, and new media. He experiments reluctantly on interfaces, both digital and analogue, and works in his research in teaching to emphasize new forms of collaboration. He’s got a rascal pup, Emily and two clever cats, Loki and Oden. Find Jesse online at jessestomel.com and on Twitter @Jessifer.

Jesse, thanks so much for joining me today.

**JS:** Yeah! Thank you, it’s great to be here.

**KL:** So I thought we would launch into first, talking about founding a journal because this is something that’s part of your background, it is something that we have not yet talked about on the show. And so I would love to hear more about what lead you to found Hybrid Pedagogy, which is the journal that you have founded.

**JS:** Yeah so Hybrid Pedagogy is a digital journal about learning, teaching, and technology, and interestingly, when I founded it, I wasn’t sure if it was going to be a journal when I first started to work around the idea – it actually – my goal with it was to bring together a community of people who were thinking about some particular issues. Specifically I was interested in bringing – basically I saw all of these conversations happening in education between teachers, between researchers who were thinking about teaching and the practice of teaching, between online teachers and classroom teachers, K through 12 teachers, higher ed teachers. I saw all of these conversations happening in relatively separate rooms, and really the goal was to find a way to bring all of these conversations together within a shared space. And ultimately what I found is that using this notion of a journal—taking something that’s a common practice in most of our disciplines—something that people recognize, but then using it as a medium to develop community and start to build some relationships that bridge various disciplines, and various different players in these conversations. So that’s what really started—what started my thinking about what I wanted to achieve with the journal.

**KL:** So I’m curious, what are the logistics that go into founding a journal? Because I can imagine some people that are listening this are thinking like, “that’s all well and good but I would not found a journal to make that happen or to have those conversations.” So maybe just some more on, why a journal and what did it mean to actually bring that together?

**JS:** Yeah. So for me, one of the things I wanted to do was I wanted the birth of this thing to happen in public with the community. So I didn’t want to go away into my room and hack away at this thing and build it, and then to release it. “Ta-da” – here it was released into the world. I really wanted it to form and figure out what it was with the community that was going to be engaging and having discussions upon it - And so what I did was it actually started as a blog. It started as a space where I was with my co-founder, Pete Rorabaugh, the two of us just started writing about this thing that we were making in public, on the domain that would ultimately be the host of the journal. So working all of our ideas about the journal in public on the pages of the journal, and then we started to peer review pieces, and release those pieces but also at the same time write at a meta level about the peer reviewing of those pieces. And so what was fun about it, and also what was interesting for me, was the way that we developed our peer review process as we were publishing these pieces right on the pages of the journal. So in some ways it was relatively easy to get this started because we just popped up a website, and put an article announcing the existence of this thing, and then Pete and I started to publish some pieces that were about the subjects that we wanted to circle around on the journal, and then we had a series of pieces that were about what we were trying to do, and then we started to publish pieces by some of our initial advisory board, and then finally we started to peer review – and tried a number of different things without peer review process before we actually figured out what it would be. So essentially you can go back into the history of the pieces on Hybrid Pedagogy and look at some of the pieces that we published back in 2012 and kind of see the journal in its formation.

**KL:** Okay so we will definitely link to that in the show notes for people who are interested in going back. Tell us a little bit about the timeline of this. I mean, you talked about how it was very much information. How long did it take to kind of solidify for you as a journal, that you kind of knew that this was relatively stable? Or has it?

**JS:** Yeah. So there’s all kinds of dates where I can pin the beginning of this thing. I could pin it as far back as 2002, 2003, 2004 – when I first started to see these conversations and started it have this idea that I wanted to bring them together into the same room. And actually in those early days I thought that the thing I wanted to build was a school – and uh I had this imagining that I would start my own school. And interestingly, the journal in some ways functions a bit like a school. We’ve done some educational outreach, we also make our process so transparent and talk at a meta-level about our process. So it has some – it in itself is pedagogical. So that’s one place I could pin the beginning of this thing to. I could also – I started to work around the idea in my brain around 2010. 2011 I started having conversations with Pete, my colleague who cofounded it with me – and then we launched our first piece in January of 2012. And then our advisory board worked with us – we had an initial advisory board that was essentially helping us figure out what this thing was going to be. They worked with us until about June, and then I would say that we experimented with our peer review process really between April and the end of that first summer, and then our peer review process was figured out. To some extent we’re still figuring it out as we go, because it changes depending on who we’re working with, depending on the author that we’re working with. And that’s something that we decided early on – is we wanted our process to be flexible. We wanted our process to grow along without contributors and along with our community. So it changes – but sort of little by little. Over the years it has become a bit more firm about how we actually approach peer review. Would I say that the journal is complete? To some extent it runs without me as the editing manager anymore – so to some extent it goes, you know, I’ve let it go off on a whorl. I let it go off on its own in the world, but I would say that it continues to figure itself out.

**KL:** So I’m curious to know - for people who are kind of listening to this, maybe they are very intrigued and they are thinking, “Oh. I might want to start my own journal. I want to found something.” Um what are the skills that went into this? You know, if you could kind of look back and think about – what were the primary things? You know, was it editorial skills, what it the skills of management? Like what was really allowing this to be eventually the kind of successful project that it is?

**JS:** I mean really – the thing that I feel we got really right with this project, and the thing that has continued to, what I would point to as the biggest success of the journey, is our editorial process. So we do what we call collaborative peer review. Essentially we have one author working together in a google doc – which is the platform we use right now. We have one author working with two reviewers, they all know who each other is, and it’s open to both sides. So these two are working in real time with the author, offering feedback, and the author is making changes that is visible to the reviewers. So in a sense it’s this collaborative process. That has been very successful. Even just breaking down the notion of double blind reviews and the effects of double-blind review on the writing process, I think has been very valuable for this particular journal. And it has meant the kinds of things that we end up publishing have a different character - have a different flavor, because we actually publish the piece with a byline from the original author and then we publish the names of the peer reviewers. So there’s this sense in which the whole process is collaborative. So that’s one thing that I think has been really valuable – is figuring out how to do editing as a sort of collaborative relationship and not as this adversarial thing that editing can often feel like when it’s blind. Not that that’s in every journal, but I found that blind peer review, more often in my experience, lends itself to this kind of adversarial relationship between writer and then reviewers. The other thing that I would say is we have decided early on to use social media pretty extensively, and it partly, that’s for promotion and marketing, but more-so it was in order to have the pieces not just be the period at the end of a sentence – the pieces are the beginning of a conversation. So we tend to publish shorter pieces. Right now, they average between 1500 and 2500 words. We have some as short as 700 words and some as long as probably 6000 words. So it kind of runs the game. The average ones are shorter than your ordinary journal article, and part of the reason for that is that we want people to not finish the thought. We want them to continue the thought, and then conversation using social media as a space to sort of really play with the ideas that are published.

**KL:** Okay. So I am wondering if there is anything you kind of wish you had known getting into this. Anything that was particularly challenging that you would give as advice for someone who’s kind of starting out on this journey.

**JS:** It’s a lot of work. And I kind of would say that finding the necessary support at the various institutions that I’ve worked up ends up being a big, big hurdle. Sustainability ultimately. So thinking from the very begging not only, “how am I going to start this thing?” but also “how am I going to make this sustainable?” I feel that - so it launched in about 2011, is when we really started to do the work to launch the journal, and it’s now 2017 and I feel like I’ve had an extra job. I finally feel, after 6 – 7 years, that I’ve gotten to a place where the project feels sustainable. Like it will continue to exist – and that’s a really important thing. To think about – well how are you going to make the project sustainable?

**KL:** I love that advice about kind of the long term commitments and strategic planning. Not always something that people think about. Alright, we’re going to take a brief break, when we come back, we’re going to talk a little bit more with Jesse about his work disrupting the digital humanities. Back in a moment.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Jesse, one of the things that we haven’t really tackled on this show yet, is this concept of the digital humanities. And I know that some of your more recent work is moving into this area, and also into disrupting it. But I would like to start just by defining digital humanities, because I think this is a relatively recent term, and some of our listeners just may not be familiar with it. So what is the digital humanities?

**JS:** So digital humanities has many different origins, various different genealogies. So one of my mentors, [indiscernible] Whitman, was working, in the 60’s, in a field called humanities computing. And humanities computing is one of the origin sources – one of the possible early genealogies of the digital humanities. The term digital humanities comes from the mid 2000’s – so a little over ten years old. And for me, what the term gets at - is it gets at the sort of Venn diagram of the digital and the digital studies, and the humanities, and thinking about the places that those two intersect. Often times people talk about it as using digital tools in order to do humanities work. So using digital tools to study literary text, to look at - parse large amounts of literary data, if you will. So for example, using computer in order to read all of the books of Herman Melville, and make arguments about a large corpus that you might not otherwise be able to parse in quite the same way. I also look at the digital humanities as using humanities tools to think about the digital. So looking at our critical faculties, critical thinking, writing skills in order to investigate and interrogate how the digital works. How do, for example, algorithms influence the communities that we build online? So, two things – thinking about how the digital influences or allows us to study the humanities in new ways, and also thinking about how the humanities helps us to ask critical questions about the digital.

**KL:** So, because this is a relatively new field, and because I’ve been watching it mostly as an observer, I do come out of the humanities, but this was certainly not a specialty area for me – I have seen it kind of moving and changing, and especially as people are trying to define it. I mean, this seems like one of those fields where people are really trying to push boundaries and figure out what fits within it. I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about, even in just these past ten years, are there certain touch points with in the field where it’s changed or developed over time, or certain areas of focus for people who are really trying to define this? Whether that is, what does a digital humanities dissertation look like? Or, you know, those kinds of things that we sometimes see cropping up as questions in the chronical of higher education or something like that. Any thoughts on that?

**JS:** I think one of the things that the digital humanities does, and one of the reasons why I have been drawn to it in my work over the last ten years is because of some of the questions it asks about what scholarship looks like. So in a sense, how does scholarship change when its primary home is online? What does a digital dissertation look like, for example? So one of the other things I’m interested in is the way that these questions force us to look differently at all scholarships, and force us to ask questions that make all of our scholarships more nuance – essentially thinking outside of the box of what traditional scholarship looks like. In my mind the digital humanities as a field isn’t just about asking questions about computers. It’s really about asking questions about how scholarship looks when it’s put into different containers. One of the things I think also has happened relatively recently in the digital humanities is that in a new field, and a field that is being invested in in particular ways, it becomes really interested in defining what it is and also what it is not. And it becomes really interested in starting to, at the worst, police boundaries to decide who’s in and who’s out. And that’s – I think that’s part of the reason why there’s so much discussion about finding the digital humanities. If there’s funding for the digital humanities – well, who gets that funding? The project that I’m working on called, *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, is an edited collection – edited by me and my colleague, Dorothy Kim, and what we’re interested in is breaking down some of those boundaries. Thinking about how that boundary policing happens, and where those lines get drawn, and pushing on those to some degree. Are those lines drawn, for example, in a way that puts white, straight, male scholars in a position of power and authority at the expense of scholars of color, women, and queer scholars?

**KL:** So I want to dig into this a little more, especially the concept of disrupting the digital humanities because it seems like at its core the digital humanities is also meant to disrupt. So, you’re kind of disrupting something that is disrupting. And I’m wondering if you can speak to kind of the nuances of that, or even the challenges of working with a field that is already to some degree not stable. And then you’re just kind of destabilizing or causing some additional questions to it. Um what has the meant for your project to kind of work with the field that is so new?

**JS:** I think when you have a field that is seen as disruptive, sometimes that field can actually become more conservative in an effort to legitimize itself. So in some ways I’ve seen the digital humanities, because it’s pushing on scholarship, and pushing on research, and pushing on what counts as scholarship. What counts as research, what counts as a field, what counts as a discipline because it’s pushing on a lot of those things, I’ve seen that sometimes it can be even more traditional, have even more of an emphasis on gate keeping, then some other fields. In a sense because it’s being questioned – it’s sort of legitimacy is being questioned. And so the reaction is to become even more conservative in response, in order to legitimize itself. And so really our project is about asking critical questions and about asking really is the full potential of a field like digital humanities being realized? And I think these questions are increasingly important in the political landscape we live in right in this moment, where the digital is being implicated—in some pretty drastic changes in the U.S.—and not just in politics, but seeing how those changes ripple out and affect all of us on a daily basis.

**KL:** So I’m wondering if you could provide some examples, you’ve kind of given some critical questions as examples for what it might look like to disrupt the digital humanities. Are there particular projects, or you know, other kinds of examples you can draw on that you think are doing this kind of work? And maybe this is something that someone is writing about, you know, for this edited collection or something that you’ve seen outside of it that you think would be a good example.

**JS:** So I’m going to give an example of a couple of projects that I see doing this. They aren’t necessarily projects that frame themselves in terms of the digital humanities, because in some ways the project of the book is to widen the scope of what is and is not the digital humanities. So Mike Caulfield is working on a project called the Digital Polarization Project. And his project is in part about how ideas and thinking, particularly political ideas and thinking polarizes on the web, and how algorithms of Facebook, for example, causes one person to see a Facebook that’s radically different from someone else’s Facebook. So thinking about how these technologies aren’t neutral and how the technologies actually have politics in a sense baked into them. So that the technologies aren’t just tools that we use, but that the technologies in some cases are something that we need to question and interrogate. So another example of this would be that a colleague of mine named Chris Gilliard, who writes about digital redlining, and it’s essentially thinking about the notion of access. How do different people, because of their skin color, because of their gender, because of their sexuality have access to different parts of the internet? How do different people depending on whether they are white, black, male, female, see different pieces of the web?

**KL:** Thank you so much for those examples, Jesse. They’re really clear and concrete, and if there are some web-based resources we can link to in the show notes we will definitely do that for anybody who wants to follow up. We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’re going to hear a little bit more about some of Jesse’s current projects. Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Jesse, as I was preparing to bring you on the show it was very fun to look over you CV. There are lots of things on there. Various projects around Twitter, and zombies, and digital humanities, and lots of fun things that you’re working on. But one of the ones that really drew my attention was something called Domain of One’s Own, and I would love to focus a little bit more on that, focus on that project. So let’s kick off with just a definition. What is Domain of One’s Own?

**JS:** Domaine of One’s Own is a project at University of Mary Washington where every student gets a domain and a space to host a site. It is a project geared toward students, exploring their digital identities, and in a sense carving out a space for themselves on the web. So I, for example, have jessestommel.com, and on that space I create a portfolio for myself where I express my identity in various different ways. So each student gets this domain space, and they can do with it what they will. Some students use it for class projects, some students make a personal website, some students use it for their writing, and some students use it for a blog. And students are using this both as a curricular element – so faculty will often use Domain of One’s Own as a location for students to do the work throughout the course, but even more interesting to me is the way that students are using these spaces as a way to inhabit the web – as a way to make the web their own. So if we think about the web as something that acts upon us, this is really in some ways an antidote to that for the students. A way that they can create the web for themselves.

**KL:** Okay so, as someone who owns – like I don’t know - 16 to 20 domains myself that I manage in various capacities, and I’ll pretty much post college. This is pretty exciting to me to think about how we can be talking with our students about this. I’m curious, what are the professional development outcomes or contexts that you’re providing for students, because obviously just having a domain may not be enough to kind of help them figure out what to do with it, you know, even from the technology side of having to kind of manage a system to kind of the more identity side of, “what do you put on the web and why?” Um can you talk a little bit about that?

**JS:** So if I think about – like. If I think aboutwhat they get from a practical standpoint**,** word press for example, is currently I think a third of the web is word press or word press installs. So many students come away knowing how to develop a word press site. Super practical skill for them to have. Is that what Domain of One’s Own is about? No – not really, because there are other things that a student might put on their domain. The piece that I find the most interesting is the very first moment when the student decides, “Well what is my domain even going to be? Is it going to be my name? Is it going to be the name of a project?” and that’s sort of choosing – sort of carving out the space on the web becomes this moment of figuring out who they are in the world. And then, if they’re using word press, the next step is often to choose a theme. What word press theme are they going to use? And I personally, you know, I think I have 40 domains and I also have probably 15 WordPress installs, and various other things that are installed on the web. And I change my theme all the time, but I find that moment of choosing a theme to be a moment of self-expression that becomes extremely important. I don’t think students get to do that nearly as much with traditional assignments like the academic essay for example. You know, 12 point font, double spaced, five pages – they probably do 15 – 20 of these throughout their college career at least. If not more. And it isn’t a space that they really get to inhabit. It’s not a space that they really get to define the parameters, determine the functions – but getting a domain name, installing word press, choosing a theme – all of these are ways that a student gets to kind of carve out a space for themselves that’s really their own.

**KL:** So I’m wondering in what ways do you see this as sort of dove tailing or not with like the e-portfolio movement? Because I think the idea of e-portfolios is to give students a little bit of a construct of what that space should look like, but to give them that place to kind of synthesize what they’re learning, you know, project something that could be seen from the outside world in a professional academy. Do you see this as related to that?

**JS:** So I have seen people describe Domain of One’s Own in some ways as an alternative to e-portfolios. I can’t stand e-portfolios, and the reason I can’t stand e-portfolios is because most of the traditional e-portfolio platforms look like nothing else on the web. They’re – they feel like a. They feel like artifice. They feel too constrained. They feel like they put students and their work into boxes too neat and tidy. They don’t let students kind of push at the frame nearly enough - and that’s not all e-portfolio. In some ways that’s the standard e-portfolio commercial platform that’s doing that. But it sort of determines the shape of the content too much. So in some ways I think of Domain of One’s Own as really a space where students – I mean they don’t need to install word press, they can install something altogether different. It’s really a space that they’re building from the ground up. They don’t have a series of boxes that they’re going to fit themselves into. And in some ways. E-portfolios are similar to social media, where you write a 160 character bio, you choose one banner image. And those are all spaces of self-expression, but they’re boxes that you pour you identity into – neat and tidy boxes. Whereas Domaine of One’s Own is just a blank canvas, and I like that component of it because that moment of frustration, that moment of existential angst – right at the beginning when you’re staring at the canvas and thinking, “Gosh. What am I even going to put on this thing? What colors am I going to use? What medium am I even going to use? Am I going to use pencil, am I going to use chalk?” And so I think that’s a really important moment, and I think that a lot of the e-portfolios platforms do that work for you and in some ways I find that to be the most critical work.

**KL:** Okay. So I want to ask a question that I think some people find a little controversial; especially in academia. It’s a word that we don’t really like to use, but it’s a part of a project that I’ve been working on – a book project, so it’s obviously on my mind and it’s very much connected to what you’re saying, and that is the question of ‘branding’. And I feel like part of what you’re talking about here is telling students to navigate this idea of what does it mean to have an identity on the web, potentially a brand on the web where they are kind of fashioning a kind of visible, you know, a kind of sense for themselves in this digital space. And of course you have mentioned – we are kindred spirits, Jesse, in which we are constantly changing our websites. I completely identify with that. I’m wondering if you can speak to that. Both as with the idea of one’s own, but also with your own sense with your space on the web. What does it mean to have that kind of personal or professional brand that you’re putting out there to communicate how you are different from other people who are out there as well?

**JS:** I just talked to a couple of really brilliant students about – they’re seniors in college and thinking about what kind of job they’re going to get after they graduate, and what they’re going to do with their lives after they graduate. And one of the things I suggest to them is that they use the space of their website to kind of work out who they are and who they want to be in the world. We can call that branding, and we can kind of think about it in a real callous way. That in a sense is like PR – personal PR. Marketing ourselves to the world. But we can also think about it as a space that is figuring out what we want to be when we grow up. And I think the reason why I am constantly changing my website is because I am constantly asking myself that question, of what do I want to be when I grow up? And so if we call that branding; it is. And to some sense they serve the same function. They conserve the function of allowing future employers to find me on the web, allowing me to market consulting for speaking - or, you know, myself for consulting or speaking gigs, but it can also just be about me figuring out who I am in a public way. If I think about being a scholar, being a public intellectual, being someone who works in public institutions – which I have for most of my life. In some ways I think that I have a duty to do that scholarship, to do my research in public and for the benefit of the public good – and my websites become the place for doing that. So I don’t think it’s as callous of me just doing the marketing – it’s a place where I share my ideas and share the thinking that I’m doing with a much larger audience than a traditional scholarly journal – you know, a closed access traditional scholarly journal might fine.

**KL:** So for people who are listening to this in a researcher community, who maybe do not have a professional website outside of their institutional site – they do not have a domain of their own, what would you tell them? What kind of – do you think everybody needs to have this now? I mean clearly it’s something that you’re kind of recommending to students to kind of think about – what about folks who are already established in their careers?

**JS:** I think – and one of the things that we talk to the students at the University of Mary Washington about, is the choice to have a domain, is also the choice to decide that you don’t want to do your work in public. The choice Is either to occupy your space in the web, or to decide critically that you don’t want to have a domain. And so I think I would say the same to scholars, I would say the same thing to researchers. I would say, think critically about what it would mean to take your work and do your work in public, and then decide whether it fits the nature of your work or fits who you are as a scholar. I don’t think I expect everyone to do their work publicly in the same ways. For example, might have a scholar who does public humanities work at the local library. And that person is finding ways to do scholarship and research for the public good, but they’re not necessarily putting their work out on a public website. There are certainly some dangers to putting our work on the public web. And I think again, in the current political climate, we have seen that those – that that kind of public scholarship can sometimes be turned against scholars. So I think doing – making careful choices about where we put our work, who its audience is going to be. One thing I would like to advocate is that if you’re working at a public institution - to some extent if you’re doing research and scholarship I think that you’re doing that wok for the public good. How you reach your public, or your various publics, I think is ultimately up to you and there’s lots of different ways to do it.

**KL:** Well Jesse, you have given us so much to think about. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show, share about your experiences, and tell us a little bit about Domain of One’s Own. Thank you so much!

**JS:** Yeah, thank you!

**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.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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