Episode 84: Ali Black

# KL: Katie Linder

# AB: Ali Black

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

# [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 Dr. Ali Black. A senior lecturer in the school of education at the University of the Sunshine coast in Australia. Ali is a narrative researcher and early childhood educator. Her arts based research and scholarly work seeks to foster connectedness, wellbeing and community meaning making through the building of reflective and creative lives and identities. Ali is interested in storied and visual approaches for dismantling personal and professional binaries for representing lives. Her research in writing is concerned with the power in impact of collaborative and relational knowledge construction. Thanks so much for joining me today, Ali.

**AB:** It’s a pleasure to be here talking with you, Katie

**KL:** So I came across your work on a blog that I read called the thesis whisper and we have had the author of that blog, Inger Mewburn on the show. I can link to that episode in the show notes. But you had talked a little bit about your work with narrative based research and also um women who write. And I wanted to talk a little bit more about that on the show…so let’s start there. Can you share a little bit more about women who write and what that is?

**AB:** Yeah well actually we are called “The Women who write” [Okay]. Mainly because the website “women who write” was already taken so we had to become “The women who write”. But that’s alright I figure because we are “the women”. Um so you can find out about us we have created a website, but again google likes to say “Do you mean womenwhowrite.com?” and you have to say “No I mean thewomenwhowrite.com” So we have put together a little website that you can go to and find out a little more that way. But we didn’t actually begin as “The women who write” we began as a group of women who would gather together, actually outside of our academia. And it was at my instigation I guess and actually for real personal storying it wasn’t for professional storying to share our lives as academics. Um and it began um I guess I was feeling a need to, to talk to women around me about what their lives where like because I was um feeling like I didn’t have um. Well my mother had passed away ten years earlier and I don’t know. But I wish I could have been having conversations with her and I was thinking about that. And I had this kind of epiphany I suppose that I actually had a bunch of wonderful women in my life who had a lot of wisdom and who could share there story’s with me. And in fact where my friends, but I kind of wanted to formalize and go “Can we write together about being in this afternoon of our lives?” I was calling it. I was reading a few people who are writing about that phase of hitting middle age and wanting to live your life a little bit differently. Where suddenly career isn’t as important as meaning. And so that’s how it began really and because I am in education and have been in academia for a long time. It just so happen the women I invited where working in an educational space or were academics. So it kind of, that was just an off-shoot really. So we wrote together over about a year really slowly and gently. We each chose our own story and wasn’t kind of fixed on what we were going to write about. But what happened was people were sharing about challenges in their lives really. So one of my friends wrote about her journey with IVF and she had a child successfully through IVF. But through that time we were friends she had been almost six years of unsuccessful IVF. And so she wrote about that experience. Another friend had a child with down-syndrome and she reflected back to the very first moments her child was born and her life um being a mother of a child that others perceived to be different. Another friend wrote about living with an alcoholic husband who actually died during the process of writing, so hers became a real grief story in action. My story I guess I was it was kind of a big one I was making sense of the death of both my parents. I was in kind of a cocoon like space, I felt and I was struggling with depression and other work those things.

So my story was called “Crystilist” and about trying to emerge from the cocoon and actually seeing the cocoon as um something that was an invitation and the darkness and can actually be a place in which to begin new lives so I was always playing around with that metaphor. So yeah there was seven of us in that first phase. Really just engaging with our lives and it was so powerful, we couldn’t have known how important it was going to be to us. They trusted me I was the only common dominator so none of them knew each other I introduced them to each other. And we meet by a zoom a skype like kind of technology. So we would wake up and just share your first like thousand words and get each other really gentle feedback. And we have just become very strong friends, as that happens when you share very deep aspects of your lives. But then what happened those of us who were academics felt really strongly that this was important in our academic life and work as well. This human dimension and actually revealing who we are as human beings and the challenges we face and the juggles that we have. So um I guess our writing started to spill over into our academic writing and our research we were being then publishing quite a lot and being invited to be key note speakers and workshop presenters and things. And there is a real hunger out there for women in academia and who are struggling with really big lives where the personal and professional are very integrated you can’t separate it. And yet the academy likes to go “Well um you need to come into this meeting we don’t want to know you have child that you are juggling or that these extra things are happening.” “We want you to be professional and meeting these expectations.” And it sort of doesn’t take into account the personal. So from there I guess a range of things have happened we invited a survey, we put out a survey we used Twitter. And within hardly anytime at all we, I think it was in the first three weeks we had like something like three hundred survey responses from women wanting to share their life as a female academic was like around the world. We ended up closing the survey when we got to about six hundred and forty responses just because we thought we couldn’t make sense of that it got a whole lot bigger. And then we kind of invited a call for people to write about their stories and we have two book contracts with Rouledge. And we had close to a hundred women submitting abstracts from that call. So what we have tapped into has kind of been serendipitous but it is a real desire in women to be themselves in academia to what it’s like and what matters to them as an academic. So yeah that’s probably a very long windowed response to how it began and where we are.

**KL:** One of the things I found very interesting about “the women who write” kind of project you have is that you are responding to a normative academic writing understandings. I am wondering if you can talk a little bit about that because it seems you are kind of reacting against in some ways in somethings we consider to be kind of normative about academic writing. Do you see it that way? That you are kind of reacting against or pushing against or back against particular components?

**AB**: Um I think we probably are it wasn’t our intent though, I think sometimes you set out to resist and I think it has just kind of emerged. That we need to be differently in academia all people not just women, I think it just so happens to be that we are women. But we actually really want to live with an ethics of care and caring and sometimes the academy um presents its self-more like a machine or like very managerial and it doesn’t seem to be a lot of heart and soul in a lot of the decisions. We actually don’t want to compete against each other. We don’t want to be delated through systemic kind of decisions or classifications we actually want to be ourselves and be differently. One of the ways we can be differently in academia I guess is through our writing. So we see our writing and I guess it emerged through our initial writing it’s about the process but it is also a product to. So it is a way of making meaning and a way of making some political meaning too. And what we have come to understand is that the personal is actual quite political and what we say and how we say it actually matters. And so I guess what we are also experimenting with and you could say pushing the boundaries about is that traditional way of communicating experience in poetry, we are interested in storying our lives, creating a script of that and performing our lives and making what it is to be a women in academia quite visible. And playing around with um with visual concepts and aesthetic concepts. So recently a group of us presented at the double A RE research workshop. And double A RE is a Australia research group. And we were we had been reading about the concept of wabi sabi which is a Japanese concept about the beauty in imperfection and just the valuing cracks and brokenness. And being able to put that back together in a certain way. So we were thinking about that notion in relation to our research and ourselves, and our use of theory. So we have kind of been allowing ourselves to engage with aesthetic ways of knowing and also presenting that in the way that we write.

**KL:** So I know that one of the mantras of your group is “Not everything that counts can be counted”. And I wonder if you can share some examples of that. In particularly what it means for you coming from an academic context but also paying attention to these other kinds of things that you want to be valuing.

**AB:** Yeah well it’s interesting we are not the only ones who have this kind of thinking. Its funny when you come across a writer or a group of writers framing notions that you and your group where actually doing and writing about. So I am not sure that the readers will know about Allisson Mountz and her colleagues. But they have an article on slow scholarship. And Dessome Allmua has talked about a slow ontology. So I guess we are connecting into that kind of philosophy of that idea of slow. So there is lots of slow moments around slow food and we are thinking about that I guess we want to give time to thinking, give time for activity, time for conversation, and relationship. I don’t know how your listeners experience their academic life but there are days where I have so many things that I have to achieve and do and I have classes to teach and I am rushing from one meeting and class to the next. And so it feels like I haven’t maybe got a lot of time to stop and chat with my colleague whose office is beside me, and ask how he/she is going or what work they are doing. So I guess counting what others don’t count or counting what can’t be counting its some of the normal things like conversation, giving the time to mentor one another and supporting one another, and engaging in general collaboration. Thinking about ways we can build a sense of community through very ordinary everyday things like attending the staff morning tea, or reading through each others manuscripts and giving feedback. So it’s those kind of things I guess where wanting to choose a different way of working. That is founded in caring and care rather than the notion of competition and striving to count numerical in the many ways academia likes to count things. So we have work load formulas, journal impact things, the amount of publications, where we publish, and the impact of that journal. There is a whole lot of measures that are out there that supposedly say you only count if you’re in focus. And I guess the thing for me I am in education and so there are a lot of those ways of counting that fit scientist beautifully, but don’t fit people working in education who research in a different space in different journals in different ways. So I guess I am pushing what counts in a rage of ways but we also want to count being a human being and the human dimension and the effective dimensions of our lives and also. I guess recognize the real pressures that come about from being in academia. You can feel you are not worthy that you are not adding up, you are not doing enough, and that it’s the wrong kind of thing. [Laughs] I always get in trouble I think maybe I shouldn’t disclose this but our dean often sends out a spread sheet where everybody’s name is listed it is a public thing. You got a feeling of how many publications, how much granting can come and how much this and how much that. And I find it confronting at a number of levels because I learn about myself where I do go down and look and see what everybody else is doing. And “oh how do I fit? Do I look really bad?” And you know so we get into that culture of comparison and lining ourselves up against somebody else and feeling a sense of lack or feeling a sense of you know great, looking at what those people had published. And so its resisting that kind of culture and saying relationship count, caring counts, giving time to things that matter counts, and giving time to thinking and to being creative and being collaborative. So its those kind of notions.

**KL:** Well we will make sure to link to the women that write in the show notes as well as some of the things that you have mentioned here on slow scholarships. So our listeners can check those out it they would like. We are going to take a brief break, when we come back we will hear a little bit more from Ali about her narrative based research. Back in a moment.

[Music plays]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Ali one of the things that really drew me to your work is that you focus on narrative based research. And I would love if you could explain to our listeners what that means to you. What is narrative based research?

**AB**: Okay well for me at its founding level it is about understanding our lives and other people’s lives through story. And so it’s a valuing and a privileging our lived experiences and stories of experience. I guess I mean from the beginning of time you can see that understanding and communication of ideas have been communicated through story and a lot of the ingenious cultures are all story’s and artistic story’s. The way we communicate our ways of knowing and our ways of being. So if you are interested in narrative research you tend to really value human dimension and human understanding. So I am not a statistition and you know I try to understand the world by numbers, but story I find easier to understanding my own life. And when I hear the story’s of others they resonate and they promote thinking and awareness and I guess a deeper understanding of what it is like to be in another’s shoes. So narrative inquiry is about honoring our lived experiences as actually an important source of knowledge. And really its about our everyday ways of making meaning as well. So everybody can relate to narrative inquiry and narrative methods, because they are the way that we engage in our everyday life. Anyway so I guess when I was first introduced to narrative inquiry I was reading a lot of Jean Clandinin work. And she’s got heaps of writing out there about narrative inquiry and she has created a hand book of narrative inquiry. So she is probably been the author that I have leaned into, but you know there are many wonderful authors who are using this kind of story approach. So Laurel Richardson is another wonderful story teller who uses aspects of lived experience, her own experience and others to help us understand. A particular phenomenon or what it’s like to live in a certain place, or to be of a certain culture. So it’s those kinds of ways of honoring experience.

**KL:** So I can already imagine there might some listeners who might not be familiar with this narrative based research, or who are more maybe quantitative, who are thinking oen of the challenges of narrative based research are sometimes its end of one. Sometimes you’re hearing the story of one person, other times you’re maybe combing the narratives of a group to kind of have a larger experience. What do you think maybe are some of the challenges of narrative based research, or the ways that people are skeptical toward it, and how might you respond to the skeptics who kind of wonder, “What can we learn from this”?

**AB:** Yeah I mean there definitely are people who question it and particularly when it’s unfamiliar, and, you know, there are real tensions. So one of the tensions for instance is what you do with the story and is one story generalizable? And so things like questioning whether something needs to be generalizable for it to be a source of knowledge and understanding, um come into question. Another thing that I always grapple with is theorizing over the top of someone’s story. I personally find that a real challenge uh, I have colleagues who use people like [*indiscernible*] there are people who give them a window into thinking about the stories that are presented to them. But I do find that really challenging because I think sometimes the story that’s shared is enough. I feel like that’s illuminating, but then you have questions too about, as the researcher, what do I take from this data? If I can’t include it all, which bit am I privileging and what does that mean if I leave this bit out? So there’s lots of dilemmas, yeah there’s certainly dilemmas like there is probably with any research. But for me I guess it’s important because it – you’re giving someone voice about this is important and this is what my life is like, and I think you can’t really question when somebody’s life experience, you can maybe question their views about something, but when they’re sharing something that they are living it does cause you to need to reflect and yeah. I think it can be quite compelling. So I actually think the values of narrative inquiry far outweigh that, and I think what narrative inquiry does is open this space, so I’m never sure which likes to be the umbrella, but I think it could be – depends on who you talk to, but some say narrative inquiry is part of arts based inquiry and some say that arts based inquiry is part of narrative inquiry, but I think they kind of blend in together. So there’s those aesthetic ways of knowing, and maybe intuitive ways of knowing, and out lived ways of knowing and I think that the arts are really powerful in helping us understand the relevance. So if I can give you just a recent example from yesterday even, one of my colleagues was sharing at a narrative research webinar that we had, she had been taking Instagram photos of her life doing her Ph.D. with her young children and she was wondering, “Could this be research data?” But it was so illuminating. She would have a photo of her at the little play center where she took her four year old so she could concentrate and read a journal article or whatever. So she had a photo of her journal article page, and her pens, and her daughter playing amongst all of these little bowls at this play center thing. And so we can say in the academy that it’s a juggle and these sorts of things but she had all of these images of what her life was like. She had an image where she actually had just left the room for, I don’t know, ten minutes. Her baby was asleep and she thought her toddler was occupied and so she went and typed, and she went back, and she took a photo, and her lounge had been covered in drawings. A couch or a lounge. I’m not sure what the term is worldwide, but, you know, her couch – her lounge – the toddler had used that as a canvas [*indiscernible*]. And so it just showed that the challenges of what it is to be a women – a woman trying to complete your Ph.D. while trying to engage in motherhood. So she had a range of wonderful images like that. And so that’s probably where we’re headed, lots of photo voice things, and social media. I think they’re going to become data sources for storying and understanding people’s experience.

**KL:** So I’m hoping you can expand a little bit on, it seems like narrative based research is really rooted in the details, in you know, trying to look at different angles of the narrative, and really deeply understand what that narrative means, and maybe the multiple meanings with in the narrative. But also there’s this sense that there’s a bigger picture of it too. That there’s kind of a micro and a macro when you’re looking at narrative. Can you speak to that a little bit?

**AB:** Yeah, well I mean as a narrative researcher we’re all going to come in with different interest. So for some of us we might be interested, like I’m very interested in the personal narrative you can tell. Um I’m interested in the individual person’s stories. But at the same time our work as the women who write, we’re interested in the institutional narratives as well. We’re interested in social cultural narratives and how those kind of plot lines ripple into universities and into our preservice teacher’s worlds and what does it mean to be a teacher for instance. So for my Ph.D. Writing way back 100 years ago, not quite, um you know, I was interested in teachers that were working in the child care setting, and I was interested in what their image of teaching was and their image as teaching. But that spoke to the wider organization about what views of child care was, and you know, there was a kind of social view at that time that there weren’t educators in a child care setting, there might be babysitters, and your work might be about play and women’s work, and yeah – minding children. And so it sort of tapped into a wider social narrative about what people thought, their views about child care and whether it was educational or not, and so that was impacting on personal narratives as well. So I guess it depends what the vantage point is that you’re looking at these landscapes from, so there will be wider social, cultural, and institutional – informing the stories that are being told. And so I guess as a narrative researcher you’re trying to pay attention to those contexts and um seeing the interrelationships perhaps it’s a bit like Bradford and Benner’s Ecological Model where you’re seeing how things interconnect possibly as well. But I don’t think all narrative researchers have the same focus or the same methodology even, but what we all do value is lived experience.

**KL:**  So I’m wondering if we can end with some examples of narrative based methodologies in your own work. What are some of the things that you’re working on now or that you worked on in the past that you think could be good examples of narrative based research?

**AB:** Um well I guess our work as the Women Who Write, where we’re inserting our snippets of our lives across our writing, so perhaps it’s more vignettey? If that’s a word [I’ll take it. I’ll take it as a word!]? Yeah so we scattering elements of our lives across our writing, but also a colleague and I we’re working with researching with children, and we want to actually listen to their perspectives about what matters to them about being in nature, so we want them to have an opportunity without adult kind of pressure or direction. To actually just be in a natural phase. And we’ve been invited to work with a local reserve, and so children are coming along to have a little excursion there, but we’re really going to make it child focused. So we’re interested in how they’re playing, what they’re interested in, we want them to tell us their stories about what they’re experiencing or hearing, we want them to draw pictures of their favorite thing or their favorite place, we want them to maybe draw a little map or take us on a tour where they’re narrating their experience of being in nature, being nature. So yeah I guess it’s just an openness to a person’s experience. So here we’re really interested in children’s experiences and their stories of their own connections to nature and what facilitates that, and perhaps what challenges that. So yeah that’s two examples.

**KL:** Well it sounds fascinating, Ali. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show, share about your work, share about the Women Who Write project, and we will definitely be linking to these resources. I know our listeners will be interested in following up, so thank you very much!

**AB:** Thanks, Katie! It’s been really enjoyable, I’ve loved it. 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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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for Episode 84 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Ali Black shares about a conference event she’s planning in 2018 – take a listen.

**KL:** Ali, I know that you are planning a conference event for the end of 2018, I’m wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about that?

**AB:** Yeah, Katie, it’s still in you know, early kind of conceptualization form, but I am really, really interested in getting feedback from women who are in academia and also women internationally about if they would come to a conference that’s focused on female academics, what would they like to experience? So I’m thinking that it probably would be a non-traditional conference in a way where it could be a range of ways to engage with other women and it might be art, and poetry, and photography, and arts based workshops. But I’m also thinking about things that connect us to each other such as writing workshops, working together to create some collective outputs that the wider academic world might see as research outputs, or non-traditional research outputs too so that we’re still – I mean we’re still apart of the academic machine so we still need to tick boxes and to get funding to come to conferences you need to be able to say, ‘These will be some of the outcomes.” So looking at what kinds of things would support your research generation. But also I’m interested in things like topic conversations and connection and what sort of things do women in academia feel they need support with? I’ve got a tentative title where I’m calling it, “Making Shift happen” and it’s kind of a play on the phrase “[*bleep*] happens” I suppose, that we actually want to work differently and have different options. It’s well known in statistics and through the research that female academics around the world actually are quite an underused knowledge source, and so how can we advance our shared knowledge, and how can we reconfigure the experience of women academics towards really positive narratives for their future and career progression. So I’m interested in exploring what “shift” might mean for different women, and I know it kind of depends maybe on where you’re at in your career. Maybe your, it’s early career academic, um and so you’re really wanting support about how do you progress your career, if you’re a working mother, maybe the things about how do we manage multitasking and juggling multiple identities and being a mother, and also being an academic. So just yeah, I’m really interested in people’s feedback about what would they like to experience? So there is a space on our – womenwhowrite.com website called ‘conference’, a menu called conference. So I would really love it if listeners would like to give me feedback about the sorts of things they would like to experience and why they think that might be significant for themselves or for the universities. Whether it’s forging networks, or some kind of mindfulness, um you know, mind body spirit kind of connections. Whether it’s yeah... connecting across disciplines, yarning circle type things. How we share our writing, presenting in different ways; maybe aesthetic ways not just through traditional research conference presentation format, so yeah, please. I would be really grateful to hear listener’s feedback, and ideas and thoughts.

**KL:** Wonderful we will definitely include a link in the show notes so people can offer their feedback if they’d like. Thanks so much, Ali!

**AB:** Thanks, Katie!

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 84 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Ali Black sharing about a conference event she’s planning in 2018 – thanks for listening!