Dr. Katie L.: You're listening to Research in Action, episode 176. Welcome to Research in Action, a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

Dr. Katie L.: On this episode, I'm joined by Dr. Margy Thomas, the founder of ScholarShape and the creator of the Build Your Story-Argument program. Margy founded ScholarShape in 2013 as an academic editing and writing consultation service, and through her years of helping hundreds of scholars develop their book and article manuscripts, she synthesized a unique framework for manuscript construction that is now the basis of the Build Your Story-Argument program where scholars hone their own Story-Argument models or flexible mental frameworks for navigating the process of writing and creating new knowledge in whatever forms and genres are relevant to the individual. The mission of the Build Your Story-Argument program is to put the benefits of developmental editing in scholar's own hands in an accessible and self-directed form. Margy lives in Durham, North Carolina with her son and their are several imaginary pets. Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Margy.

Dr. Margy T.: Thank you so much for having me, Katie.

Dr. Katie L.: So I am really excited to dive in to this concept of developmental editing. I honestly can't remember. I'm sure it's come up on the show before, but I'm not sure we've really focused on it, and I do think people have a lot of questions about what exactly is this kind of editing, what are the benefits of this kind of editing. So can you give us kind of a brief description first of what is it? What is developmental editing?

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah. Well I love that you asked this question because I totally agree that even though to me, I see it all the time, so it feels like this pervasive ever present aspect of the writing process. It's not something that everyone's necessarily super aware of, but the way I like to think of it is developmental editing does for entire manuscripts what you might think of copy editing or line editing doing for individual sentences. So when you line edit, you go sentence by sentence helping the author determine what elements to include in what order to communicate the intended meaning. With developmental editing that happens on the scale of the entire book, or article, or chapter, or essay. So you think about what is the core argument here, what's the central point, and then what elements need to be included to communicate that and in what order and how is it all framed? So a developmental editor gives you feedback in the process to help you do that.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. So it sounds like you're kind of taking a step back in the manuscript and kind of looking at it a little bit more from like a 30,000 foot perspective to try to get some of those structural questions addressed versus the really detail oriented questions of the manuscript.

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah, exactly, because when you're the author, you're just so close to it, you're really deep in the weeds and you know so much about your subject. It can be harder to put yourself in the perspective of the reader to know how it's all coming across to them. So developmental editing really helps with that.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. So I'm really curious, I always love origin stories. How did you get involved in developmental editing? What kind of draws you in to this kind of editing in particular?

Dr. Margy T.: Well, it sort of happened by accident. I kind of followed my clients here, so I started off right after grad school, I started line editing because that's, it's a commonly used, commonly understood service and it's one that I was well equipped to deliver and had a existing professional network I could get the word out and start getting those kinds of projects. But then over time, when you're line editing, you're polishing what's already there and if there are underlying issues in the manuscript, if the book or article doesn't yet know what exact point it's trying to make, line editing doesn't really help you. So over time working with my clients, I ended up becoming involved more in this developmental kind of aspect of the process before I even knew what developmental editing even was. So that term I discovered a little bit later. But yeah, so I got here by following my clients.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. So I'm curious if you can talk about, because you've worked with several people over time, what are some of the challenges that you see scholars facing that you think is solved by developmental editing or working with a developmental editor?

Dr. Margy T.: I think that the benefits can be emotional as well as practical. So my favorite feedback that I ever get from clients is when they say that working with me helped them feel less alone in the process. It's really hard to find someone who will come so deep into your project with you to care about and know all the different intricacies and contours of it. So having a developmental editor kind of gives you company in these dark caverns of knowledge construction. But just practically speaking, I think that working with a developmental editor can help you get more efficiently to the heart of the matter. When you're developing a book or an article, you have to wade through so much data and iterate through so many drafts to get to really the core, like what is really the point here. So having someone at your side can help you get there with less pain and struggle, and then what you produce, you can send it off into the world, confident that it's your best possible representation of your research.

Dr. Margy T.: Then over time, a benefit that you see happening sort of incidentally, is that you internalize a lot of the principles and concepts of argument construction yourself. You kind absorb, you can, well, my vision is I want authors to become their own developmental editors. So as you go through the process of working with an editor, you end up internalizing the concepts so you can apply them when you're actually writing in your future work.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. So Margy, I can imagine some people listening to this might be interested in hiring a developmental editor, but they may not know how to go about doing that. How would you find someone? How would you know that they're the right fit? Can you tell us some of the logistics of even the timelines that you work on as a developmental editor and how much time, how much lead time you would need to engage in a project with an author?

Dr. Margy T.: That's a really good question. My general sense is that developmental editors tend to book several months in advance. So you want to really be planning ahead to get on their calendar, and of course like anything in academic writing, the timelines are long and slow. So once you send your work to them, it might be weeks or a month or so until you get the work back from them. So I guess the short answer here is plan as far out as you can in terms of thinking how this would integrate into your writing process. Where you would look for one, I would say ask, ask around. I think every client I have pretty much comes through word of mouth. So ideally you want to be able to talk to someone who's already worked with that editor to get a feel for their style and that kind of thing, because it really is a fit issue. You want to make sure that you're working with someone who you trust to hear your voice and lift up your voice, not impose their own voice, not impose their own ideas on your work, but really hold space for your work. Yeah, that's the main thing I would say as far as choosing a developmental editor.

Dr. Katie L.: That's really helpful, and I would imagine too that some people are listening to this and thinking, "How would I know that I need one?" What would be some of the signs? What would be some of the questions that maybe a writer would be asking themselves that would help them to know they do need kind of a thinking partner in this work? What guidance would you offer to people to kind of help them make that decision, if they're trying to decide do I actually need a developmental editor or can I do some of this on my own?

Dr. Margy T.: Well, the first thing I would say is that what a developmental editor does is essential to the process. So if you have it from somewhere, you're good. You might have it from a colleague, you might have it from a mentor. So I guess the first step is just to recognize that creating new knowledge, building scholarship, is inherently a collaborative and social process. We need to have people to bounce our ideas off of. We need to have someone we can send our rough draft to, to read it and tell us how it strikes them, and tell us what they found fascinating, what they found confusing, whatever. So I guess when you would need a developmental editor would be if you don't have that from somewhere else, and it's great when you can access that from somewhere else, but I think this manuscript development support is, it is embedded within academia in certain ways, through colleague relationships, there are editors at university presses, there are peer reviewers who all do this kind of work day-to-day. So the moment you need a developmental editor is when the existing embedded ways that it is in academia aren't serving you, and you feel stuck, and you feel like you're pouring a lot of effort into your work and not able to measure any progress.

Dr. Katie L.: I really like how you described that, Margy, because I do think a lot of people when they're thinking about working with someone else in a more kind of professional relationship, they might ask themselves like, "Is it appropriate?" And especially in certain disciplines where you're really meant to do work on your own and there's a lot of concentration on kind of solo manuscripts. Some people may feel like this is not appropriate to have kind of an editor relationship, but the way you've described it is just saying this is what everybody else is doing in terms of their network, in terms of their friends, their colleagues, the person down the hall. It's not necessarily any different than that, but you are kind of putting dedicated resources to finding someone in that relationship. Do you have anything else you want to add about that? For people who may be saying, I feel like this is one of those like hidden secrets of academia. A lot of people are using editors. They're just not necessarily talking about it.

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah. Yeah, and it's funny because I have a very firm confidentiality clause in my contract, so my clients know I will never breathe a word that we worked together. So I have this hyperawareness of this invisible labor that goes on all the time. I guess one last thing I'd add is to just be really mindful and purposeful in your communication with your developmental editor, like what information you give them, what you communicate about your needs. The more you tell your editor about what you need, where you're struggling, what would be helpful, the better they can tailor their service to where exactly you are in your [crosstalk 00:11:05].

Dr. Katie L.: [crosstalk 00:11:06] Advice. That's so good advice. It is really a personal relationship. I think about the editor relationships I've had with my book editor who it's a long-term relationship I've had, with journal editors I've worked with over periods of time. You do end up having a very kind of personal relationship. Writing can be a very intimate thing and like you said, having someone come alongside you and witness your work over a period of time, that seems like it can be a really special relationship too.

Dr. Margy T.: It is. Yes. I love my clients.

Dr. Katie L.: All right, we're going to take a brief break. When we come back, we're going to hear a little bit more from Margy about her concept of building a story argument. Back in a moment.

Dr. Katie L.: The Research in Action podcast is brought to you by Oregon State University Ecampus, a leader in online education that's committed to making access to a top ranked education available to learners worldwide. Our online students live in all 50 States, more than 50 countries and five continents, and since 2002 more than 5,000 students have earned a degree online through Oregon State Ecampus. Learn more about our global reach and impact and our 50 plus online degrees and programs at ecampus.oregonstate.edu.

Dr. Katie L.: Margy, one of the things I know that you have been working on and developing over kind of a longer period of time is this concept of building a Story-Argument, and this is one of your strategies that you work with clients on. Can you describe what you mean by that? What is building a Story-Argument?

Dr. Margy T.: Yes. So Story-Argument is the underlying pattern that I see across all compelling scholarship. I know that's a really grand statement, but in my work over the past decade or so, from my doctoral training in genre theory, and literature, and all that, through my years and years of being an editor and writing consultants with researchers in all different disciplines, working in all different genres. I've worked with engineering doctoral students, I've worked with historians publishing their second book. I've worked with a vast range of researchers, and the pattern, the deep pattern that I see in articles, books, chapters, any kind of research communication that is really fascinating and compelling is that it follows this pattern of telling a story and advancing an argument at the same time. So the research process is basically like we have a question, we'd go out and gather a bunch of data and evidence to try to answer the question, and then we make meaning of it by constructing it into a form that we can publish. When we do that, we actually draw on the two fundamental methods of meaning making that humans have.

Dr. Margy T.: So storytelling is a way of making meaning by tracing a change or development in a protagonist, argument construction is you make, when you construct an argument, you make meaning by arranging evidence underneath claims and then sequencing those claims to persuade the reader of the argument or the audience of it to accept that claim. In a story argument, we combine both of these. So you have your one core essential idea, your thing that you are revealing about your subject, and then you have a sequence, a beginning, a middle, and end through which you reveal that to your audience. So we see this again, we see it across disciplines and across genres in research communication. So this is like, this has become my obsession. Distilling and synthesizing the story argument model into a form that any scholar can use to visualize the scholarly process and construct their scholarly products.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. We're going to dive deeper into this because I'm completely fascinated by this idea. But I do know, a lot of researchers now are really kind of challenged in that they have to communicate their work to a pretty wide range of audiences and stakeholders. Whether they're talking in grant applications, or they have a peer-reviewed article, or they're doing more of kind of public scholarship. I'm wondering if you can talk about how a Story-Argument and kind of an awareness of that framework can help researchers communicate their work to the wide range of audiences that they're having to engage with now?

Dr. Margy T.: Yes. Okay, so I think one of the most exciting things about the Story-Argument model is that you can actually see this pattern everywhere. So once you're looking for it, you can see it in long-form journalism, you can see it in creative projects, you can hear it in podcasts, you can see it on websites. It is a deep pattern of meaning making. So if you're thinking about your scholarship, so if you're familiar with the components of a Story-Argument and how they fit together and you have that framework for thinking about your scholarship, then you have this ready-made way of translating your scholarship into all these other types of genres for communicating with different audiences in different contexts.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. So we can hear your passion about this model. What are your favorite aspects of the Story-Argument framework that you've developed?

Dr. Margy T.: I think I love how it really lifts up scholarship as something that can be and is or should be really fascinating and vital. I think academic writing has this, can sometimes have a bad reputation of being boring, dry, full of jargon, inaccessible, unrelatable to. That's a stereotype that is sometimes applied to some academic writing. With the Story-Argument model we're saying no. Actually when we create new knowledge it is one of the most amazing things that humans do and there are ways we can craft it. We can infuse it with our creativity, and our sense of joy, and our passion for our subjects, and we can infuse that into the knowledge product in a way that's contagious that invites our reader, our audience into that fascination too.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay, so I can imagine Margy that some people are listening to this and saying, "Is this kind of writing that's exciting and infused with passion, all of these things, is it actually publishable?" Because a lot of people are used to academic writing that is a little dry, and filled with jargon, and all of those kinds of things. What are some ways that you are kind of infusing the idea of the story argument into more traditional modes of structure for an article that would still be publishable, that would still be recognized by a journal as being rigorous while also having some of these other elements that you're describing?

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah, that's a great question. So I guess the short answer is I know that it works because my clients all publish with the typical traditional journals and university presses that you've heard of. So that's one thing. I think another thing is that you hear all the time that people express that they appreciate when academic writing is clear and understandable. It's like we all want it, I think many of us want it, and Helen Sword in Stylish Academic Writing, she gives the empirical evidence for the fact that we all want, we all appreciate stylish writing and we all want to be able to write it but aren't sure if we're allowed to sort of. But again, with the Story-Argument model, it's a deep pattern. It's talking about the deep structure more than the superficial features. So I think fascination runs so much deeper than whether you have a flashy anecdote or a joke in your manuscript. What makes it fascinating is when it's structured in a way to lead you, to lead the reader by the hand through this discovery of what it is that you're communicating about your subject. So if you have a central revelation that is surprising and important, and has implications far beyond the subject, then that's interesting. There's a deep interestingness to that, and then if you construct the manuscript to lead the reader logically through an understanding of that revelation, that's fascinating.

Dr. Margy T.: So yeah, so it's a kind of deep, heavy kind of fascination, more than like, it's not like sitcom, or like the superficial kinds of things that grab at us.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. I love that because it makes it sound less like a gimmick.

Dr. Margy T.: [inaudible 00:19:47] Exactly.

Dr. Katie L.: And more like something that's, yeah, a very deep communication tool.

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah, exactly.

Dr. Katie L.: Okay. So I'm always looking for different ways to build my own confidence as a writer. I know a lot of academic writers are trying to do this as well, and it occurs to me that the story argument model is a way for people to really deeply understand what it is they're trying to communicate and that this might actually also help researchers to increase their confidence about their message or what they're trying to communicate. Can you talk a little bit about how the story argument model might help researchers increase their confidence in their work?

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah. So I think one thing is that, so I think sometimes when we feel anxious or lost we tend to reach toward templates, like someone just give me instructions to follow, but then templates and rigid instructions like that, they can end up feeling rigid and constraining, not really leaving room for our creativity, and discovery, and our original thought. So the Story-Argument model provides a lot of the comfort and security of a template, but it's a lot more flexible and open to allow space for your ideas to emerge and grow within it. So that's one thing. It just kind of holds you. Another thing about the story argument model is that it gives you a vocabulary for asking for feedback from other people. I think of scholarship as knowledge products and you can never develop a product without beta users. You have to test your product on people during the development process and get data on their experience with it, how it works for them, and then you, that data then informs the development of the product.

Dr. Margy T.: So with the Story-Argument model I'm giving you a holistic picture of the shape of the product you're trying to create, you have specific questions you can ask people and things you can look for in that, in soliciting and implementing that user feedback. Then by the same token, it helps you let go of the feedback that's not helpful, because I think a big challenge that authors face in the writing process is even deciding how do you keep a sense of ownership over your project when you're so dependent on what peer reviewers say, and what editors say, and what gatekeepers say. A Story-Argument model is like a lens to look at all feedback through and determine what's useful and what's not and how to implement what you are going to use. So it just, it gives you a, it's I think it builds confidence by giving you, it puts you in the driver's seat and it gives you a clear way to navigate even though you don't know exactly where you're going and you don't have your whole path laid out for you, you know how to decide what your next step is.

Dr. Katie L.: I love that. Okay, well, this is fascinating, Margy, and we will link in the show notes to some more information about your Story-Argument model as well as Margy has a Build Your Story-Argument program that she offers through her editing business. So we'll link to that in the show notes as well in case anybody 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 from Margy about her underlying philosophies for some of the work that she does. Back in a moment.

Dr. Katie L.: We're proud of Research in Action and hope you find the episodes interesting, valuable and actionable. If you're enjoying the show, help others discover Research in Action by rating and reviewing it on iTunes. Margy, I would love to hear a little bit more about some of the broader philosophies that are underlying your work as an editor and kind of as you're working with academic writers from this really wide range of disciplines. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah, so for me at the very center of the scholarly process is the relationship between the scholar and their reader. So the audience for the scholarship that they create, and I see scholarship as, like great scholarship, like when you think about the the best, most transformative, most influential scholarly works that have been created, they're the ones that where the scholar, the author is almost like a conduit connecting the reader to the subject. So the reader is transformed by the process of experiencing the scholarship and integrating the knowledge about the subject. So for me, the way that I understand this process, how does scholarship like this, scholarship scholarship that is powerful like this, how does it come into being? For me, I think it flows from a scholar who is in a particular kind of place when they're doing their work and supports and resources themselves in a particular way and comes to their work as a whole human being. So I think in academic conversations we do talk about self-care, and get enough sleep, and nurture your relationships, and all the stuff that happens around your scholarly work and all of that is super, super important. I'm really focused on the scholar as human in the work, in the work of creating scholarship, and so what that means in my understanding is really honoring and centering faculties that we don't often talk about in academic work, faculties of creativity and intuition.

Dr. Margy T.: Scholarship is a creative process. We're making something that didn't exist before, and so many times throughout the scholarly process we have to make decisions and judgment calls without enough information. We have to use our intuition to make the decisions that move us through the process. So everything about the methods that I use really center the scholars creativity and intuition in order to resource the scholar to create scholarship that transforms the reader. So what that means in concrete terms is that there are certain spiritual practices and creative practices that I use in my own life and kind of weave little bits and pieces of it into the structures that I create for scholars to use.

Dr. Katie L.: I love that concept of kind of thinking about intuition because as you said, so much of the work of scholars is making choices, and sometimes with limited knowledge about how to move something forward. But also there is so much about the work of scholars and researchers that is about trust and kind of trusting their abilities to figure something out, especially when they're working with material that can feel very challenging and you're not sure what to make of it. I mean if you have a large dataset for example, and you're just diving in and you're thinking, "I'm not sure I'm the right person to do this. I'm not sure I can really kind of bring something out of this that will be of use to other people." And there's such a mindset around that, about making sure that you are kind of feeling capable as you go into the work.

Dr. Katie L.: I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that. What are some of the core mindsets that you are trying to establish for yourself as you do this work, but also that you're hoping to bring about for your clients?

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think maybe the, it's really simple, but I just now and then I stop in my work and just remind myself I am here in this moment doing the work that is weighing most heavily on me and this is my work to do. Those moments of centering yourself in your work, because we're always surrounded by overwhelming amounts of information and our to-do lists grow faster than we can check things off of them, and there's always another achievement to attain beyond whatever. The universe is vast and we're so tiny within it. So I think treating scholarship as a creative practice and even as a spiritual practice is a way of centering ourselves within our work.

Dr. Katie L.: One of the things that really appeals to me about that is I do think many scholars come to a place of niche where they are kind of the only person who can speak from a particular perspective just because of how they've been trained, or their experience in a certain form of scholarship, or a field, or a discipline, and sometimes I think we forget that. We kind of forget no, I am the right person to do this work because of my past experience or because of my passion in a particular area, and that centering seems like it could be a way of reminding ourselves of no, I'm the right person.

Dr. Margy T.: Yes.

Dr. Katie L.: This is where I'm meant to be.

Dr. Margy T.: Exactly, and remembering that knowledge is always built from a particular perspective. So there's a knowledge that only you can build, because you're the only one, any given scholar is the only person at that place with that set of past experiences looking from that angle at that subject.

Dr. Katie L.: Absolutely. Okay, so Margy, you've also mentioned this idea of researching or coming to research and scholarship from the concept of a spiritual practice or a creative practice. Can you talk a little bit about maybe some examples of what that could look like for people who are kind of thinking, "I'm not sure what that would look like in my life." What are some ways that you've seen that work, either in your own experience or with your clients.

Dr. Margy T.: Yes. Okay. I would love to answer this with a client example. If I can think of a way to do it confidentially. Well, I'll just answer for myself. So I have a tarot practice. I use tarot cards, just in my daily life as a way of centering myself, getting in touch with my intuition, processing situations. So tarot cards, for people who aren't familiar, it's a tradition with ancient roots that are indeterminate. Many different cultures have a tarot tradition, but the deck as it exists today is 78 cards that are thought to represent all aspects of human experience. So at any given moment, there are certain kinds of open ended questions you can ask, you can ask the universe, ask yourself, ask if there's a spiritual being who you believe in, ask that question and then turn over tarot cards in whatever spread matches your question, and then you can gain insight that way.

Dr. Margy T.: So I use it in my daily life, in my life outside of work, but I also use it in my work, which might sound a little strange, but if I feel really stuck. I spend most of my time analyzing manuscripts that the author is stuck on, so that stuckness can translate to me and my thoughts get all tangled up trying to process, okay I've got 300 pages here, what are they trying to say? I can ask tarot and turn over cards and somehow to me it feels like magic. I don't know how it actually works, but somehow it's like the knot can get untangled or loosened by studying these images that are designed to operate at an intuitive level.

Dr. Katie L.: So this is something also that really resonates with me, Margy, because while I don't have a tarot practice, I do have a practice of writing morning pages, à la Julia Cameron's The Artist's Way, and so I wake up every morning and I write a few pages, and this has been a place, and I think kind of the theme I'm getting at here is reflection, asking yourself questions, and sometimes even identifying the question that is on your mind but under the surface about a particular topic or issue.

Dr. Katie L.: Sometimes I'll just ask myself a question and use the morning pages to respond to that question, and sometimes I need to respond for like a week until I get the answer that I'm looking for. But this concept of just what is under the surface, what is the thing that I'm truly wanting to know, or that is kind of challenging to me right now, or that is feeling kind of muddled or unclear. I mean, that makes a lot of sense, to have some kind of practice in your life where you're asking yourself that and trying to raise those things to the surface.

Dr. Margy T.: Yes, that's really true. I love morning pages too. Sometimes I go through phases where I really need to do that every morning as well. I totally agree, that's really powerful. You're right, really the key here is allowing space and time in your life to ask yourself the questions that are lingering beneath the surface, to bring those questions to the surface and let your mind turn them over however that looks, whether it's freewriting or going for a walk, or looking at tarot cards like that, that when you do that you nurture a part of yourself that is, that's where the soul comes from in the scholarship that you create.

Dr. Katie L.: One of the things I think is really interesting about this kind of piece of our conversation is that there is so much about academia that is encouraging you to look outside yourself, to look for either affirmation through people who are reviewing your work or to try to find answers in the data that you've collected, and some of the things you're describing here are really about turning inward and kind of trusting yourself, trusting that instinct to see where you should go next or how you might make a decision. That's the thing that in some ways runs a little bit counterintuitive I think to how we're often trained in academia.

Dr. Margy T.: Yeah, that's very true, and I don't think it's an either or, it's not that the inward is more important, but I think it really has been left out of these conversations and our understanding of the process and the way that we often navigate the scholarly process. So yeah, so this idea of I'm very conscious of needing to inject more of this into the conversation and weave it into the larger process as a complement to all of those external feedback mechanisms you talked about.

Dr. Katie L.: Well Margy, this has been so fun to delve into these topics with you. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and talk with me today.

Dr. Margy T.: Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it too.

Dr. Katie L.: 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 a new episode. The Research in Action podcast is a resource funded by Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education that delivers transformative learning experiences to students around the world. Learn more by visiting ecampus.oregonstate.edu. This podcast is produced by the award-winning OSU Ecampus multimedia team.