



How Researchers Changed the World Episode 11

Ella Kahu: Opening up higher education: understanding and improving student engagement

EK: I'm certainly not alone in this one, there's plenty of research on this, that learning is transformational; that it does change people. It doesn't just change them; it changes their children and it changes the next generation of children. It, it doesn't just open doors of opportunity, which is a bit of the cliché. But it opens minds and that is entirely different. And teaching this course that I'm teaching now, this course on identity and belonging and citizenship, and I have students who say to me, you know: "I see the world differently now. I get stuff that I didn't get before, because I've learnt about these ideas, these concepts, these theories and so now I can see the world differently".

KR: That was Doctor Ella Kahu, Senior Lecturer at Massey University, New Zealand. Ella wouldn't describe herself as your typical academic – and that's a good thing. Ella came to higher education later than some, studying alongside her full-time job as a stay-at-home mum of two children. Her story typifies the work she is passionate about as a teacher and, now a renowned, published academic researcher.

EK: When I left school I kind of fell into a job doing varying administrative stuff and then IT stuff. And then I had my children and I made this decision to be a stay-at-home parent but actually I found that quite challenging and I needed something, something else. So I went and I saw a careers adviser actually and did a whole lot of psyche kinda tests. You know, what you should do when you grow up. And what they said was that I should teach adults, which totally, totally worked for me. I liked the idea of teaching, but I didn't like the idea of teaching kids. And then when we looked into it, it was like, well what do you do if you want to go and teach adults? And it was kind of, it's not like I set out to be a lecturer in university but one of the things that came up was, well you can do a general degree in psychology. I thought that sounds...you know...that sounds alright. It's about people. I quite like people. That could work.

KR: Ella was able to undertake an undergraduate degree, Masters, and PhD almost entirely as a remote learner. She's turned this life experience into a successful career helping to change both her students – and her profession.

[How Researchers Changed the World introductory music]

KR: Welcome to How Researchers Changed the World: a podcast series which will demonstrate the real-world relevance, value, and impact of academic research; and highlight the people and stories behind the research.

My name is Doctor Kaitlyn Regehr, I'm an academic researcher; an author and a scholar of digital and modern culture – and I'm interested in how new technologies can broaden the reach and real-world impact of academic research.

In today's episode, we're speaking with Doctor Ella Kahu. She proudly redefines the boundaries of what it means to be a researcher in the 21st century. Ella is passionate about making higher education accessible and



engaging to everyone.

EK: People also see themselves differently and I think that's important. There was this, after since I last spoke to you actually, we had our actual graduation ceremony and I was sitting on the stage with all the academics and there was a woman and she was sitting just in the second row, so I could see her despite all the stage lights. She was a Pacifica woman and she had been in my first-year psychology course that I was teaching quite a few years ago now, I don't know how many, quite a few. She had struggled. She had found it really hard. This was such a new, foreign world to her, and she didn't have... ah I was about to say she didn't have support at home but that's not fair. She had an amazing family, but they didn't understand the challenges and demands of higher education so...one of the things about Pacifica families, like they're incredibly collective. They support each other, that's what they do. But that means that if an aunty needs something or the family needs something, then everyone is expected to go and do that and stop their study or just not do their study. So it's hard, it's impossible to explain.

But anyway, this young woman had struggled but she had persevered, and she ended up sitting in my office and we'd had lots of conversations about this. Then doing later courses, she would come and sit in here a couple of times or send me an email going, "I'm just struggling a bit Ella, can you maybe give me a bit of a hand." And I would help her a little bit. Not a whole lot. I'm not saying I saved her world, but there she was graduating with her Bachelor of Arts degree. She had on a Pacifica kind of cloak on top of her regular graduation gown and she had the biggest smile on her face I've ever seen. And I caught her eye from the stage to the first row and I just gave her a wee nod and she just beamed at me. And when I came out after the ceremony, I looked for her and I found her and she just gave me this ginormous hug and I was just so proud of her. And she introduced me to her mother, who was so proud of her and her father, who was so...and the entire family was there. And at that point she didn't have a new job, you know, I don't know what doors are going to open up for her, but I know that the world will be different for her and for her children and, it will be a better world for her and her children than it would have been. Her self-confidence, it just shone.

KR: Ella is a psychologist and given her experience and research on higher education, she understands as well as anyone the impact education can have. We're gonna be hearing about Ella's journey and unpacking her 2011 paper: 'Framing student engagement in higher education'.

EK: My name is Ella Kahu. I am a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology here at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand. I suppose I should mention that bit shouldn't I. And what else would I say? I research in the area, mostly in the area of student experiences in higher education, though I do have other bits that I do. And I teach mostly first year students, which I think is quite important to the bigger story. So a lot, most of my teaching, in fact almost all of my teaching is students who are new to university.

KR: Let's pause and go back to the start of Ella's journey.

EK: So, I was at home, with two kids who were I think two and four at that point, and I did one university paper, and that felt like such a huge deal. I remember the very first assignment was write a 1500 word essay. I remember thinking, 1500 words! That's ridiculous. How can I possibly do that? I had, I mean I had finished school, I was a perfectly capable person, but I hadn't been immersed in education. And I realized that that I loved learning and that was something that quite a big deal to me, to understand that about myself. So I just



carried on studying while my kids were young and I finished my, my Bachelor of Arts degree and this was all done by distance, which is a really critical part of the story actually. So I wasn't going to classrooms. I was receiving at that stage, big folders in the mail and submitting my assignments by post - showing my age totally. And I just sort of carried on and it took me eight years to do my undergraduate degree - which is, if you do it full time, a three-year degree, for which I think I'm really grateful, I think it was a really good decision because I was able to focus on the learning and on my love of it, and on, to be honest, trying to get good grades, to challenge myself, rather than trying to rush it through. And I wasn't in a hurry and I was lucky. I was privileged. I had a husband who was earning enough money to allow me to look after the family and to be at home and do this study.

And then when I finished my degree, I was a bit like, well what am I going to do now? And at this point I had completely forgotten about the whole teaching adults thing and I was just like, ah well I'll do a Masters because that's next right? So, I just carried on and I did a Masters.

And then by then I was getting part-time work at the university, marking, mostly marking because it was all still distance. Occasionally I got to go to campus and sit in a real classroom and act like a real student. Though I was one of those, you know, the students talk about them, the mature age students, who sit in the front of the class and ask all the questions. And they're not cool, not cool people. And so I was tutoring at that point and it was like, wow! This is great. I like teaching, which is where I'd started but I'd forgotten.

KR: Ella found studying and teaching both rewarding and challenging. She knew that she loved teaching and had enjoyed learning, but how could she take this forward into a career in academia?

EK: Because I loved my teaching so much but you can't actually progress in university as a university academic, you can't become a real academic if you don't have a PhD and if you don't do research as well as teaching. So I finally realized that the secret was to do some research about my teaching, or about teaching at university.

And so, I decided that I would do a PhD and I would do it on the experiences of mature age students at university. And it was the best decision ever, because I loved it. I loved the fact that I was researching something that I was incredibly passionate about. But now, instead of passion being just about what I think is a good idea or what I think might work, I was reading the experts and I was reading people who knew about this stuff and I was doing my own research. And that was the foundation of my career really.

KR: Although Ella initially had her reservations, she found researching something she was passionate about really helped her complete her PhD. She had intimate knowledge and lived experience in the subject.

EK: I finished my PhD, was working part-time in casual work, as you have to in academia to get your foot in the job, in the door kind of thing. And now I'm like a real academic and it's not that long ago. So just to give some time context, I started my PhD in 2011. That paper that you want to talk about later is the first paper in my PhD and it's now what, 2019, so, this is eight years ago. So I am by definitions, an 'early career researcher', which as someone who is 56 years old, I kind of like. The idea of having early career in my title is kind of cool. So yeah...I didn't set out to become a researcher is the answer to your question. I set out to teach and learn more about teaching and to learn more about students, and in that process fell upon the pleasures of researching and what I could get from it, and what therefore my students could get from it, I guess.



KR: Many of the researchers we've learned about in this series have come to a career in academia as a result of direct lived experience – and Ella is a great example of this.

EK: For me it was actually, it was things that I found challenging. That for me, the social world made difficult for me. So my first one which was my Masters around me being a mother and working and making those choices about do I work? How much do I work? How do I juggle these two, what felt like conflicting identities? And this is back in the early 90s. I think they're still conflicting. So it wasn't that I enjoyed this process. It was like, this is hard. Why is this so hard? And I think being able to go out there and understand that one, it's not just hard for me, but it's hard for other people, and then to be able to, to.. add a thread. If you imagine knowledge as a woven - I was going to say a type of cloth but that's a Pacifica thing - a woven cloth, then each piece of research and each piece of knowledge is another thread in that cloth. And for me to be able to add just a tiny, tiny thread to that knowledge that we have about this particular element of human experience, feels really, really powerful. And because it comes from me, and that makes it challenging sometimes, and I think this is important. So for my work, so in my PhD when I was interviewing students who were going through what I had gone through, and I'm interviewing them as a researcher, so supposedly objective, just listening to them. But I'm just wanting to help them the whole time. So I just wanted to give them advice and say, "well in my experience, think about this and don't forget this." And that juggling of myself, my lived experience of myself and my researcher self, I think is, is an ongoing challenge.

And so the kind of research that I do, doesn't claim to be utterly objective, scientist and white coat research. It recognizes that our research is a co-construction. It's a construction between me and my participants. It's not just them. It's partly...I'm the lens through which their experience is viewed, so I'm part of the story and I'm part of the findings. And I think that's a strength, in that I have been through what my students in this particular case have been through, but it's a challenge as well.

KR: Part of Ella's work focuses on facilitating higher education through distance learning. This was the way in which Ella was able to undertake her higher-ed – at the same university at which she is now Senior Lecturer.

EK: And when I came to study myself, I didn't have the time to...I live maybe 40 minutes from Wellington city, from the nearest university campus. It's not that far, but nonetheless, to get childcare, to do things like that, it just didn't seem an efficient use of my time to drive in, to find a park - which would have been utterly impossible - to sit through a 50 minute lecture and to drive home again, and have to find childcare and time out of my life. And Massey University where I work, is New Zealand's kind of OU equivalent in some ways, as in they have always been New Zealand's biggest provider of distance education.

And it does make a difference for people because it allows people who have other things in their life, or who live geographically distant. And people who come to university later in life, they're paying a big cost and I don't mean the financial cost, though that is a really big part of it, but they are giving up time with their children or they're giving up potential employment, like income. So instead of working, they are coming to university so that's a big lost income at a different time in life. So it's a big sacrifice. And therefore, anything that one can do to make it a more efficient process, I think has real value.

KR: After the break, we'll find out how Ella's influence and motivations would translate into a published



framework which would help universities to define and seek to improve student engagement.

[Advertising break: intro music]

In this podcast we explore the multitude of ways that research impacts the world, from the influence on political decisions, to how it can revolutionize practices within a field such as healthcare, to how it can shape public opinion and worldviews. We believe that every researcher has the power to change the world in some way - and we want to help make this happen for you.

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[Advertising break: outro music]

KR: Before the break we were speaking with Doctor Ella Kahu about her experiences as a student and teacher engaged in distance learning.

EK: The challenges of distance study still exist. And when I was doing my PhD, I remember there was all this stuff, if you go to places like the Open University and Massey, and it says things like, 'online education – study anywhere, anytime'. And they make it sound really easy, like it's so flexible, it overcomes the barriers of time and space. They have all this gorgeous marketing rhetoric wrapped around it. And quite frankly it's just BS, it's just rubbish. Because if you're an internal, on-campus student then your time and space is carved out for you. Like you have to be there for two hours, so you have made childcare arrangements, so you get to study. Whereas, when you're studying in the home, with the baby crying next door and, I don't want to be gendered about this, but the husband asking where his dinner is, it's not as easy to carve out the time and space as one might think. Or people who don't have kids but who have got full-time jobs and they're studying after they get home, after a full day at work. It's hard. But at the same time, it opens a door, a door that would not be open if we didn't have distance learning. I mean no one calls it distance learning anymore. They call it online learning because it makes us feel like we're not distant, but we are distant, and it feels distant sometimes, and it can be really, really isolating.

And one thing that my research really was about, was exploring that research that the framework article was part of, was about exploring that and understanding it and understanding how we can do better to support our distance students, to make them feel less isolated.

KR: According to the literature Ella reviewed, student engagement is widely recognized as an important influence on achievement and learning in higher education. What isn't clear is what the term 'engagement' means.



EK: When I decided to do my PhD on student experiences, I came across this concept of student engagement. And I thought, you know, this is a word that we hear people use a lot. If you were to ask any teacher about it, you can actually - and in fact I was at a presentation today and the presenter said, “what, what are the barriers to your students being engaged?” Now nobody sticks up their hand and says, “what do you mean by engaged?” Everybody has a kind of common understanding, or they think they have a common understanding of what engagement means. But when you’re doing a PhD, you have to define things and you have to have a clear understanding of the literature. So in trying to figure out the literature, I read all the stuff by psychologists, by sociologists, by educationalists, by people working in higher education but also people working in secondary and primary education, so the lower levels of education, about what they thought student engagement was and what their research had shown them about student engagement.

It was like going into Alice in Wonderland’s rabbit hole. It was just like, nobody agreed. There were all these different definitions and a lot of research that had been done claimed to be research on student engagement and they didn’t even define it. I wanted to get a picture, you’re supposed to do, of what we now know about student engagement. Here’s the gap, here’s what I’m going to add to this, the thread that I’m going to add to this thing that we’re weaving.

KR: Up until this point the definition of student engagement was fuzzy. How did Ella provide us with a broader and more clearly defined understanding of student engagement?

EK: I created what is called a framework of student engagement, where I tried to depict what it is. So, to answer the question that you actually asked which is ‘what is engagement?’ When we ask people about engagement, they often talk about behavior. If you say, “are your students engaging in class?” They’ll say things like, “Yeah, no they come to class and if I ask them a question, they’ll put up their hand”, or “they’re submitting their assignments.” So it’s all about what they’re doing. But what the literature shows and a slightly more psychological if you like, understanding of student engagement shows that there’s more to it than that. That it’s not just what students were doing; it’s how they’re feeling about what they’re doing. So it’s got a real emotional dimension to it, whether they are enjoying it, whether they’re interested in it. These are emotional responses. And it’s got a real cognitive dimension to it. It’s got things about how they regulate their learning, whether they’re doing deep or shallow learning, the learning strategies that they’re using.

KR: Ella realized she had to create a definition that went beyond what engagement was and included how it worked, what influenced it, and what impact it had for students.

EK: Some people said that student engagement was what the teachers are doing, and some people said it’s what the students were doing. So what I did was I drew a picture. And in some ways I feel like I simplified the heck out of it. And people sometimes need that kind of simplifying work. And I think I realized with hindsight that that’s what I did. I took a lot of stuff and I simplified it into a picture, and the beauty of the picture is the whole picture speaks a thousand words. And I showed the student at the center and I showed all the influences and I categorized them as university influences and student influences, because what happens is that we spend a lot of energy thinking about what the university is doing, because that’s what we can influence. There’s a lot of research about good teaching and about curriculum design, about assessment and how those engage students.



But the student is often seen as almost like an empty vessel, but we know that what the student brings with them is also important for their experiences at university and whether or not they engage. And so I drew out some of that in the framework as well. So it talks about the student's background, about the skills, the identities, their past learning experiences - what I call life load.

KR: And what is life load?

EK: I coined the term 'life load' to mean...we talk about work load but life load is when you've got kids and a part-time job and a mother that needs your help or a...you know, these different things that take up not just our time but our time and our energy. And students come with an existing life load and that impacts on their ability to engage. They come with pre-existing personality characteristics and identities that impact on their ability to engage. And those characteristics of the student interact, intersect, with us the university and that's the critical thing. They're not separate influences. They interact. And what that means is challengingly, that what works for one student, doesn't necessarily work for another and I think I really helped to clarify that.

KR: As we've already discussed, engagement is an essential ingredient in achievement and academic attainment, but there are wider implications around fulfillment that would make Ella's framework important. Her supervisors recognized the significance of this piece – even before the framework was finished.

EK: I wrote it and my two supervisors, who were working in the area of higher education and knew about student engagement and stuff, said to me, "this is going to be..." I think the words they actually used was "a seminal article" and I laughed. I really did. I was like, "oh yeah, whatever." And they said, "put it in Studies In Higher Education because that's the highest ranked higher education journal. Try that." And I did and it got accepted. And I was stoked because I had earlier work published but this was the first one of my PhD and I sent them the email and went, "look it's, you know, they want some changes, because they always want changes, but really, you know, I think it might be accepted." And they were like, "wow, that's fantastic!"

And at the time I had no understanding. None at all. And then I remember, I don't know when it was because things get published online, and then I read something that cited my work. And I was like, "Oh. Wow. Look at that. People are reading it. That's quite cool isn't it?" And so I Googled it, you have to Google yourself a little bit, and realized that other people were reading it as well. And it's been a slow build up. So it was first published online in 2011 and then in print in 2012, I think. And it probably would have been a good year or two later, when I was nearly towards the end of my PhD, that I really started to think, wow this thing is really having impact. They say that and they mean impact by citations. And I think I was applying for a job or something like that and I had to go and get some actual statistics, to say why, you know, why I was any good as an academic. So I went and got actual statistics and it had like, I don't know, 200 odd citations on Google Scholar. And I was like, wow! That's 200 people who haven't just read it, but they've, they've used it, they've found it useful enough. I went and looked at some of them as you do, to make sure that they weren't all citing it going, "well this is a whole lot of rubbish isn't it?" because they could have been, and they weren't. They weren't.

KR: The article would soon get recognition around the world.



EK: I went...so by now I was towards the end of my PhD and I went to a conference in Australia. And the keynote speaker, who was someone whose work I had read, and I thought was highly respected in their field, they are highly respected in their field, Professor Karen Nelson, was doing her keynotes presentation. And she was talking about student engagement and she talked about her own work and she said, "but do you know what I think? I think the way forward is in the Kahu framework of student engagement." And she put up a slide with my framework of student engagement. And a friend / colleague of mine was sitting next to me and went, "That's you!" And I was like, "That's me!" And it was quite surreal, it was quite surreal. And I talked to her afterwards and I actually ended up with a postdoc position at her university in Australia because of that conversation. So yeah, it still surprises me and I'm still a little puzzled by it.

KR: We asked Ella why she thinks her framework was viewed as so important.

EK: We as researchers, we go off and we do our different things and we read each other's work all the time, but we don't always have a shared understanding. And I think that this resonated because it gave a shared understanding and therefore allowed us to better understand the student experience, and therefore allowed us to, to work to that student experience better.

One of the things that I think the framework - I hope that that framework - does, is get people to understand that different students are different, so that when you're working with my mature-aged distance students, that that is a different experience than if you're working with school leavers. And if you are working with what we call, non-traditional students, the higher education sector has gone through a huge change in the last twenty, thirty years which, gone from being an elite kind of education system for just European, middle to upper class, school leaver, male originally, to conscious efforts - and this is that contextual stuff again - to widen the participation. So we now get a lot more, in New Zealand, Maori and Pacific Island students, but also students who are the first in their family to come to university, and things like this.

And one of the things that I think the framework, if it's used intelligently and if it's thoughtfully used, recognizes that they come with different backgrounds, different life loads, different family, different identities, and that matters and we need to be thinking about that - in our policy, in our curriculum, in our assessments, in our classrooms. So I think that it matters because if you can understand the student experience then you can improve the student experience. But you can't understand it unless you can really tease it apart, pull apart the bits and look at the separate bits, even though those separate bits are a ridiculously complex network of interconnected relationships.

KR: Author, speaker and international adviser on education Sir Ken Robinson said:

"The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed, it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions."

As Ella points out, higher education is in the midst of a revolution and it needs to reform to be accessible to all.

EK: We're getting better at recognizing that learning is an emotional experience and that that emotional



experience is absolutely critical. So that feeling good about your learning, not feeling anxious, not feeling frustrated, not being bored, that this is really really really really important and we need to understand that. And that was really missing.

Like my research really showed that if a student was really frustrated because the instructions weren't clear and the teacher was never, you know, replying to emails, so they were just getting angry and frustrated, it didn't just make them feel angry and frustrated, it stopped them being engaged: they didn't want to learn anymore. And so that was the thing that was missing in many ways, to me. To me, that was one of the things that was really missing, and I didn't, I was surprised that it was missing.

KR: And the framework continues to have impact around the world. Meaning Doctor Kahu is in high demand.

EK: So at a first level beyond my own personal teaching practice, I do look for and take every opportunity to share that with other academics so in a very direct way. So, this is not through my research but very directly. So I use my research and that framework, and I present it to other groups. So I was today, just today, I was presenting to a group of teachers here at Massey University, and particularly talking about tutor-student relationships, but always looking at it from the perspective of that framework of student engagement. So always exposing people to those ideas.

And I'm going to the UK in two or three weeks time and I'm presenting in Ireland and at Manchester and at Lincoln universities, about the framework of student engagement. So I like to think that me doing that has an impact. So academics come to those things, so it's not just researchers. And that's I think, one of the things that I love about my work, is I'm not just influencing other researchers, I'm influencing practitioners, in this case academics who teach. And I like to think that they sit in a presentation that I do, and they take...I don't really care what they take, but they take something from that back to their classrooms. Even if it's only an understanding of the complexity of their students' lives and a better understanding of what it's like to be a student. Or it's understanding that emotions are important, and that they need to manage their students' anxiety and frustration, or understanding that the assessment structure. Whatever it is, but they take it back and they apply it to their own practice. So that's kind of the next level.

But I also think, and this is the bit that has surprised me and I don't think I really, I don't even know what it's being used for, because to me the beauty of publication is that you come up with an idea and you kind of launch it a little bit like a ship into the night. You just set it free. And what people then do with it, I don't know. I don't know. I know that lots of people cite it. I know that lots of people have read it and I'm assuming that if you cite and read something, you've done something with it. It's changed your thinking in some way.

KR: Higher education needs to transform in order to meet the needs of our rapidly changing world. With greater accessibility and availability of university places comes competition. In the current climate, universities will need to factor in the experience of their students if they wish to attract and retain them.

Recognizing and understanding student engagement will ultimately form an integral part of improving the student experience and ensuring good academic attainment. We believe that the Kahu Framework will be an important part of this ongoing story.

EK: If there was any possibility that my work could make a small difference in that field, I would be beyond



stoked.

Research, I think creates knowledge. It creates sound knowledge, that is equitable knowledge and it can then be used to make change. Because the point is to make change. To me, I'm a social scientist, to me the point of research is to make the world a better place for everyone. And that's what research enables us to do. To find out what the world is like for everyone, for different peoples in different situations and therefore, to be able to figure out what we can do to make the world better for those people in those situations. And that relates to the learning thing because I think these are part of the same story. When I think about this, I'm, my drive is the same in both my research and my teaching.

KR: To find out more about this podcast and today's topic, visit howresearchers.com. We'd also love to hear your feedback on today's episode. You can leave us a review on your podcast provider, or send us your thoughts on social media - tag us on @howresearchers and use the hashtag #howresearchers.

In the next episode, we'll be hearing the remarkable story of DPK Pillay; soldier turned academic researcher, social and political campaigner. It's the last in the series, so make sure you tune in. If you need support and advice to ensure your research gains the recognition and exposure it deserves, look no further than our very special learning program, developed with Taylor & Francis – it will give you a unique insight into getting your research out into the world.

This podcast was written and produced by Monchü and recorded at Under the Apple Tree Studios. Our producers were Ryan Howe and Tabitha Whiting with editing, mixing and mastering by Miles Myerscough-Harris at WBBC. We would like to acknowledge the incredible support of Taylor & Francis Group, with a special thank you to Elaine Devine and Clare Dodd.

I'm Dr. Kaitlyn Regehr, join us next time for How Researchers Changed the World. Thanks for listening.