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Transcript for Culture Replicate, Season 2 Episode 5: Culture Replicate with Dr. Katie Wedemeyer-Strombel Part 2

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STEMculture Podcast 0:07

[Intro music]

Brooke 0:18

This is part 2 of our interview with Katie Wedemeyer-Strombel. So if you haven't listened to Part 1 yet, do that first. This is a follow up to our culture series episodes 1-3 with Twitter's favorite graduate student advocate. In this second part, we asked Katie about her role as graduate student advocate, about her experience studying both natural and social sciences, walking away from graduate school, and her positive experience in graduate school. So buckle up while me, Dani, and Will continue our conversation with Katie.

Dani 0:54

This episode goes out to all the social scientists out there, I still can't figure out how to talk to people. That's actually Zach. Today we talked about her work- Katie's work as a graduate student advocate, and as a sea turtle scientist, who includes local people as contributors and stakeholders in her research.

Let's goooooo! [interview recording begins]

So Katie, so you're you're pursuing graduate student advocacy. And you've been a graduate student advocate the last several years, really. So, you know, when you were thinking about that path, did you weigh the risks and benefits and what have the implications been to that decision?

Katie 1:33

I didn't- aside from just like making, you know, be careful of how I talk about things like we talked about earlier, I didn't really weigh the risks and rewards because I didn't really plan on it. You know, when I first joined Twitter, I thought I was going to be like the sea turtle person, and I was going to be, you know, spouting all these because I love giving talks to kids and I like talking about ocean facts. But I like doing that much better in person than necessarily it's like in writing. I just, I like to interact. And so it- my brand or whatever just kind of came from talking about these issues really openly that other people didn't really want to talk about. And, you know, I mentioned that to my advisor that I finished with and and Carla was so supportive and encouraging of me pursuing this that I felt like I was in a really safe space to be transparent about my experiences because I had a professor who supported me. I had, you know, I, the new university I was that was really supportive and gave me a lot of opportunities to amplify my voice. And so, you know, that was a really helpful thing to recognize, okay, I'm safe. I can say these things. And like my funding's not going to get taken away. My professor's not going to keep me

from graduating. I was in a really supportive environment where I knew that I could be more and more transparent and share more and more of my story. And so that was, you know, not everyone that's been through bad things is in a place where they can talk about it. Not everyone is in a place where their funding is protected, or their bases protected or whatever, you know, other obstacle they have, or had things I wanted to say. And I knew that I was in a place where I could say them, and I would be okay, career wise. So that was kind of why I started doing more and more. I don't really want to be a tenure track professor like that's not something that I'm striving for, at least not right now. And so I wasn't really worried about how this will impact someone wanting to hire me. The risk of losing potential jobs was outweighed by just knowing that I don't want to work for someone who doesn't agree with what I'm asking for. And then as far as the resulting implications, I mean, it's been- it's been really cool and I feel really lucky and honored that I'm, you know, one of the people that gets to help kind of move this forward. My Chronicle articles- that was- that all came from Twitter. So a Twitter thread of mine kind of blew up. And an editor from the Chronicle reached out to me and asked me to turn it into an article. And then I pitched the other two articles to them after that, and so that's been really cool because it's been able to reach a really much larger audience. And that was how I got invited to talk to the graduate school senate (the professors that are in charge of doing, like, making all the rules for graduate school), and so I got to talk with them. And as a result of our conversation (in the fall), they are- a top priority for them is to create and fill an ombuds position (so a confidential contact- basically a confidential advocate that can help with graduate students navigating tough situations). So that's been really cool to kind of like actually see little things happening here and there, but honestly, like the biggest implication has just been connecting with really cool people from all walks of life. People have been really generous and sharing their stories with me. And I always feel really honored when people share their stories with me. And that's really, for me, those have been the most rewarding implications of all of this is just knowing that, you know, other people have found their way out of a bad situation or have advocated for themselves, because they've heard my story, it's it helped them know that they could do it too. And, you know, I, I knew that I could do it because of the support of my community that I had around me. And so it's nice to be able to pay it forward. And, you know, I hope that more and more people will continue to talk about it and amplify these voices. That more and more universities and graduate schools will invite students and listen to their perspectives and respect their perspectives, you know, and give them some weight. So I think that that's the kind of the biggest the implications from it.

Brooke 5:59

So you- you're a PhD, and you are involved in kind of a mix of natural science and social science. And I really love this because I feel like this reflects a lot of my background as well. And I'd love to know how these two worlds have really taught you about STEM culture. And, and how this affects your science as well. And then if you could just give us a brief overview of what it is that you study.

Katie 6:34

Yeah, so my PhD was interdisciplinary -it's technically in environmental science. So I combined it with social and the natural sciences to help improve conservation. And so I took kind of a environmental communication stakeholder engagement approach to develop collaborative relationships with local fishermen in rural villages in El Salvador and Nicaragua, which also happened to be near the primary nesting beaches for the critically endangered hawksbill sea turtles in the eastern Pacific region. And so I was focusing on it started out as sea turtle research, the sea turtle conservation research. And then I really developed a passion for the social sciences and integrating local knowledge into science that we do and really taking theory and methodology from communication and the social sciences. And using that to work with the fishermen so that I would I could learn from their knowledge, their local expert knowledge, they can learn from my knowledge, and then together, we kind of developed hypotheses and I use their knowledge exclusively to guide all of my natural science work that I did. We got a really robust idea of the habitat used by these critically endangered turtles which is something that we didn't know really anything about in these particular waters that I was studying. But a huge part of my

research project was to really encourage integrating the social sciences into natural science work into respecting the social sciences as natural scientists. I came from an ecology background, my bachelor's degree is in ecology, behavior, and evolution and so many of my professors there, and some biology professors that I, you know, that I worked with in grad school would say, Oh, well, social science, that's just talking to people or Oh, you're going to work with her. She's a social scientist. And I had that bias when I went into it too. But, you know, as soon as I got into that field, it was, you know, it felt silly, but it was so eye opening to me that there's, you know, grounded methodology. There's theory that has been tested. There are really specific steps you have to take when you do talk to people, there's no just talking to people. It's how do you actually ask the questions? How many questions do you ask? What format do you ask them in? Are they written? Are they verbal? Do you use a map? Can the people you're talking with read the map effectively? What are the cultural considerations you need to take into account when you're asking questions? How anonymous do you need to keep it to protect everyone? So there's all these different aspects, the same way that you don't want to contaminate a DNA sample or you don't want to, you know, take a tissue sample incorrectly, and then you're not going to be able to use it, you have to follow similar types of protocols in the social sciences. And that was really cool for me to see especially coming from such a STEM background, where I always found there was quite a bias towards the "soft sciences" as they were often called. And so that has been really cool. It's been one of my favorite things: really learning and integrating the two sciences and showing how complimentary they truly are. And, you know, as we talked about before, in grad school and including these diverse voices, there's so much local knowledge and so many different, you know, it comes in so many different varieties that it can be really helpful to us at any of the sciences. But also, it's important to respect that there are different types of knowledge cultures, and that expertise comes in many different forms. And knowing that, you know, if we all put our egos aside and are happy to incorporate these different kinds of expertise, there's this whole, you know, there's all this knowledge out there that deserves to be respected and included when we are, you know, generating new knowledge or when we're trying to say, Hey, this is what we found. So that was most of my- most of my dissertation actually ended up being more on the social science side and my first publication which should be out soon, it's been accepted [co-hosts say congratulations!], it should be out here soon, thanks, talks really about what are the advantages to-

to it to incorporating a couple of different social science theories when we- when we do interviews when we- when we create collaborations with local stakeholders. What are some advantages that we see when we approach it in a certain way that's really trying to respect their time and their knowledge and their own dedication to our shared goals. So I've seen kind of both worlds. And there are similar pressures. There are similar positive and negative PI-student relationships that I've seen, you know, across disciplines. There are similar biases, actually, some field biases as well, this is how we should always do all these things, because this is the field that I'm in right so you get that on either side of it. But I really liked- I felt really fortunate to get to learn about both of the sciences. It's- it's introduced me to a broader network of people that I would have met otherwise because I go to conferences in both of those: in the STEM part and the the social science part. And so it's really cool to get to meet even, you know, more diverse people from different backgrounds and both educational and personal background. I think we have a lot to learn from one another in these- in these different disciplines. And I hope that especially in the conservation world, which is the world that I know- that I know the best. And that there's a huge benefit to combining these different types of knowledge. And so that we can really come at a problem from different perspectives and learn the different- the different sides of an issue because everything is so dynamic and complex these days. So the more ways that we can come at it and the more expertise we can use to answer our questions, I think that the better off that will all be.

Brooke 12:47

Yes, I wholeheartedly agree. You made my anthropological roots very, very happy to hear everything you just said because I really feel like that- that colors every all of my science I'm doing now. And I feel

like I always come at it from like an anthropology perspective. And being able to view molecular questions from that really changes the frame in what you view the question. So it's awesome.

Will 13:17

Especial- especially as biologists, who, you know, are mostly in the Northern Hemisphere, mostly in the United States and other Western countries. The idea that, you know, the biodiversity that we're studying, that the- that the people who have lived in it for 10,000 years or whatever, have nothing of use to say about it... I mean, probably most biologists aren't thinking that, but probably- it's functionally equivalent to to that because- because they're not thinking about it at all. So-

Brooke 13:17

That's a very good point.

Katie 13:57

Yeah, and it's something that I felt like I was: how I often phrase it is the awesome community members and fishermen that share their knowledge with me, their lives depend on knowing that information, my PhD depends on it, I will never know that ecosystem and the different animals that inhabit it and the different conditions that change hourly, daily, weekly there, as well as they will, because my life does not depend on it. So knowledge passed down from friends, family, mentors who have lived in the area for generations together that knowledge is expert knowledge on certain subjects. And so when, you know, that knowledge combines to create expert knowledge on subjects that, you know, can have a broad benefit to, you know, local realities, (which of course, is, you know, one really important thing to consider whenever we do social science work) is what are the local realities that the folks that we're collaborating with that they live in and and to be respectful of those. But how can those and whatever the other priorities for biodiversity conservation, you know, access to resources, whatever, maybe, you know, overlaps there, where can we find shared goals that respect what they need as locals and their livelihood and their local reality of how they live and and what these other goals are, what's the shared or the commonality there and then kind of go with it and use the combined different types of knowledge to better approach and try to achieve those shared goals. So it's a, it's, it's really, it's really fun work. And, you know, I'm so thankful and honored that the folks that I worked with shared all their knowledge with me, it was just incredible. And by far, the most rewarding and humbling and really special part of all of my research- I mean sea turtles are cool, but listening to these cool stories and all this truly expert expert knowledge was just really, really cool. So I'm excited to get to share it more here shortly.

Dani 15:54

So what kind of future- and I always hate asking people this because sometimes you're like, "I don't know," but what kind of future are you trying to carve out for yourself with graduate student advocacy? Because I've heard you, or I've read you on Twitter talking a little bit about this. And you know, I'm kind of curious about what challenges you may be facing.

Katie 16:14

For me what's next, I'm not sure I'm looking into a lot of different things, looking into environmental consulting, consulting, really focusing on stakeholder engagement, which is not necessarily going to be with the advocacy itself. But you know, I'm also going to apply for some jobs at universities, if I can find them here, where I'm at now in the in the Denver area, to hopefully like maybe work for a university as- in some kind of capacity to help support students so that I have like institutional support, and can expand my work a little bit because most of what I do is just on my own free time right now. And you know, I'd really like to grow it. I'd really like to write more articles and just make the information more accessible to more folks. So I'm not sure exactly what it's- what it's going to look like, you know, it's a, especially now that I've graduated, I have a job for now that- that pays the bills that that- that I enjoy. It's rewarding, but it's not something- I don't necessarily have a lot of free time to do these other things.

I- hopefully we'll get to continue and kind of expand and help encourage others to continue and expand their advocacy as well. So we can have a domino effect. But yeah, that's kind of where I'm at trying to figure out where I want to go with it. And honestly, I've thought about- I mean now that I'm graduated, do I just want to walk away from all of it and like, pass the torch on to someone else and stop reliving these things that I've been through? Which I've gotten pretty good about just kind of like being really objective about it. And I've gone, you know, I go back and forth with- I think I just want to be done talking about these things to be in like, oh, no I'm really inspired these things so I'm still kind of on that roller coaster of not totally sure where I want to go with it, but so I'm just kind of keeping an open mind to see where it can take me and if I have more opportunities to amplify my voice and to help other people, you know, through that, then I'm I'm happy to do that because it's, it's really rewarding for me to be able to help other people. And so hopefully I get to continue doing that. And what capacity or what that's going to look like I'm not exactly sure. And hey, if you know if you know any programs that want me to come give a talk, I love giving talks. So you know, that's always something I haven't promoted that as much on Twitter as I probably should. Since well, I was dissertating so

Dani 18:48

yeah, just finishing your PhD, no big deal! [sarcasm, laughter]

Katie 18:52

Yeah, so I'm gonna try to- I might try to promote that a little more. See, see if I can get anything there because I- that I love getting to, I always love getting to talk to other grad students and encouraging them to recognize that they have choices and that it's, you know, their life and their education. And so they get to tailor it, however suits them. Yes.

Will 19:15

So, did you ever want to walk away from graduate school? If so, why? And why didn't you? And then the last part of this several part question, do you know people who have walked away and what are their stories?

Katie 19:34

Yes, off and on over the whole seven years.

I had high highs and low lows early on towards the middle and man that writing that dissertation, wow. things are going downhill with my my first advisors. I think really, I stayed I had a really strong cohort. My original cohort was like the best. And I like they're still, like so many of them are still, you know, some best friends and are going to be lifelong friends. And they really helped me up when I was thinking and they really told me that I could do it and showed me that I belonged and a few faculty members, too. That, you know, told me like, you can do this, there's a place for you here. And so that was a huge part of why I stayed. And then when things got really bad with my lab, and everything kind of exploded, before I got my GRFP, I was like, Well, my fiance just moved here from across the country about a month ago. And now I'm thinking I'm going to walk away from grad school, and I don't know, neither of us will have jobs, neither of us will have a place to live, what are we going to do? So at that point, life kind of kept me in it because I felt responsible because my fiance, now husband, had kind of, you know, left his career to come follow me and support me and what I was doing. And I felt kind of responsible to see it out. But as things got really bad and I was like, I don't know if I can do this... I just remember over and over again, like kind of the straw that broke the camel's back for deciding I needed to leave that lab was that I just- all I could think about all the time was, I don't know that I can survive this another four years. I don't think I can survive this another four years. And that was just constantly the narrative in my head. And I started talking with a couple other faculty members who I, who I had built a positive rapport with and who I trusted, and they said, first of all, graduate school does not and should not be like what you're experiencing. And you can do this and you can leave your lab: you have options. And it was really then that I was like, Okay, I think I can do this, but I have to find a new situation because I can't do this one.

And then I got my GRFP like the next day, which was really great timing. I like screamed and cried and my husband thought I hurt myself. Because I was upstairs and I got my email and I like shrieked, and I just gotten out of the shower and it was like a movie where someone like shrieks and I was like crying and he came running in the room and I was like, crumpled over the computer crying with my towel on the floor. He's like, Are we happy? [laughter] And so like, that was that was a reason I, I was probably a day away from walking away from everything, and I got my GRFP and it kept me at grad school. So for me, that is a big part of the life changing aspect of that, of that honor. And and then after that, you know, the advisor ended up with, Carla Peterson, is just... She is such a great role model and such a great advocate for her students and she's a strong researcher and well respected in her field and just is the kind of person that I hope to be when I'm a, you know, when I'm a professional. And so she was such a big part of me staying and continuing on because she showed me, you know, what it can be like. What it- what it should be like. So that coupled with some really awesome positive experiences at some short courses at the University of Utah that are actually going on right now there. One's called ISO camp, one's called Spatial - they're isotope short courses, summer camps, they're awesome. But really those introduced me to some other really fantastic colleagues who have become really good friends. And it was really showing me Hey, academia can be collaborative, there can be camaraderie, there can be professors supporting students that aren't even there. So they don't have anything to gain from but they just want to be mentors and role models and help students succeed. And so a another combination of moving into my new lab and then right after also going into these really positive short course experiences really showed me that there is this other really good side to academia and, and that kept me in it. I would have probably walked away from it had my advisor not said-

I told her I you know, I'm feeling really resentful of my work, I'm uninspired. I can't even open the word document without having a full on panic attack and she said, Okay, I'm taking away all of your dissertation deadlines. You tell me when you're ready to bring them back up, take as long as you need, focus on yourself, be focused on your relationships. And having that permission from her was huge. And so I took a whole year and I taught I, you know, I made sure that I fulfilled my ta requirements at a at a high level. But I didn't do any dissertation work. I took, like almost a whole year off and it was why I finished was because I took that year off. And I hope that more advisors recognize that just because we need space from our project doesn't mean we're not hard workers, or not dedicated or not going to finish. Sometimes we just need space. And so that was- that was why I finished really. So I, you know, I'm so thankful for her support and for believing in me and knowing that when I was ready, I would come back and I would finish. And I came back in September and I defended in April the same [academic] year. I do, I know people who have walked away. Yes, I know several people who have walked away from my original cohort. I think there's maybe five of us, if that, who finished out of 20 students, and all of us took six or seven years, most of us took seven years. The timing thing how I used to like be like, how does it take so long. I reframed it in my head eventually, there is no time when I should have graduated. The only time that I should graduate and defend is when I am ready to graduate and defend and that doesn't matter on anyone else's timeline. That doesn't matter what everyone else is doing. The only time I should defend is when I was ready to defend. I know a lot of people who have walked away from grad school I know people who are very successful in like informal education at Zoos and Aquariums who did a semester of grad school and decided, "This is not what I want to do. I'd rather continue with the science communication," and now they're directors of education at big facilities. I know people who are in charge of educator training and private corporations who walked away from grad school because of toxic environments. I know people who work for different types of philanthropy foundations, different types of cancer research foundations who are in art school, so many people have, I think- that's- honestly I think walking away from grad school is probably harder than staying in. Everyone that I know that walked away seems to be really happy that they walked away, from- from those that I know personally. And people that have stayed, most people are happy they stayed I, you know, had heard a couple of mixed reviews. But it but you know, I think the biggest thing, and what I always try to emphasize, that there's no right answer to this and you we have to just do what's best for us in our own lives. In our own situations, and I use the analogy that if you have a friend that's working,

you know, if that's working at a bank, right out of college, and they have a boss who's verbally abusive, they make them work too many hours, they're incredibly unhappy. They hate everything about what they do. Do you say to that friend while you signed up for five to seven years of that, you are not allowed to leave? No! You say, "Well, that sounds awful. Leave, find a better job find something, find a better field that you're interested in that fits you." But for some reason, in grad school, it's like you go in for a semester, you are in for life. is like what right- Like what it feels like. It's like, there's this weird thing that yeah, that that you don't have a choice or that you're stuck because you started a program and you do have a choice and the lessons that you take from graduate school, whether you finish or not, or not I think are really... There's so much that I've just been translating CVs into resumes. And you know, we do project management, we do grant writing, we do budget management, we do interpersonal communication, all these cool skills that you learn whether you finish or not, that can be helpful in a lot of different career avenues. And so, you know, I think, I think, again, you know, reframing it as you can, you know, try it out. If you don't like it, you can leave and that's fine. You're not a failure. If you don't finish, you're not a failure. If you don't leave, you just decided that there was a better option for you. And hey, that's fantastic. Yeah.

Dani 28:35

One of my favorite articles you wrote was- had the title, you know, "grad school should be challenging but not traumatizing." I sent that one to my advisor. [laughter] Just to help him understand some of the issues I was talking about because he was kind of being a little, little dismissive.

Brooke 28:53

What were your most positive experiences in graduate school and really what made them so?

Katie 29:00

Sure. The- some of the top ones are definitely the short courses at the University of Utah that I went to. I've written blog posts about them raving about them, but mostly because they- they introduced me to a couple of folks, especially that have become like lifelong friends, some of my best friends. And they really showed me how wonderfully positive, collaborative and fun academia can be. They're tough. They're really busy. You learn a ton of information in a short amount of time, but I always was really happy and enjoyed it and was really empowered by you know, there are some of the folks that teach those are National Academy of Science members. And that can be really intimidating. And they were just so nice and approachable and wanted you to ask questions and created an environment where you felt really comfortable saying, I have no idea what you're talking about. So that was really positive and encouraging. And then working with my advisor just in general, with Carla Peterson was just so incredible, working with her and collaborating with her and learning the the human dimension side of research from her was so positive because she was so patient and open to my ideas coming from a different background that it was really so cool to, to kind of collaborate with her and put our ideas together. And I think the other one that really stands out is I got to go to the International Congress for Conservation Biology in Cartagena, Colombia a couple years ago, and I got to meet up with a bunch of different folks from Twitter. And they were so inclusive for everyone who wanted to meet up and so kind and made it so fun. I mean, the biggest thing is, is when really, when there's collaboration when there's camaraderie, when there's mutual respect, and belonging, kind of just being handed out is really, really, really nice. And that's awesome.

Dani 30:49

Well Katie, you want to thank you so much for your time and I just have two last questions. One, say your full name for us because I don't know how to say part of your last name. Then, to let people know where they can find you (besides the guests tab on STEMculturepodcast.com).

Katie 31:06

Yeah, so my full name is Katie Wedemeyer-Strombel. And most people get that wrong. [laughter]

And you can find me on Twitter at krwedemeyer, which is K-R-W-E-D-E-M-E-Y-E-R. And then I have a WordPress site: katiwedemeyer.wordpress.com. And I'm on LinkedIn as well. So those are the main: Twitter, LinkedIn and my website, if you Google my name those things generally pop up.

Dani 31:36

Yeah, we'll link to all of those on our website. Wonderful. Katie, thank you so much for taking so much time. We really appreciate the conversation.

Will 31:44

Yeah, it was great.

Brooke 31:45

Awesome.

Katie 31:45

Yeah. Thanks so much for initiating it and for inviting me on. It's important work that y'all are doing. So I'm happy to be part of it. And good luck as you continue on, and also do all of the other things.

Dani 31:58

Yeah, no big deal. It's fine. [sarcasm, laughter]

Brooke 32:01

In this episode, we chatted with Katie more about how she started graduate student advocacy, the advantage of having experience with natural and social sciences, the importance of local knowledge, what's next for her, considering leaving a graduate program, and her favorite parts of graduate school. This concludes our interview with Katie.

Dani 32:22

Thank you all for listening. Next time we're going to have our last in the "back to school" series, where we're going to be talking a little bit about your first year of grad school. We're on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook as STEMculture (one word) Podcast and when in doubt, visit our website at [STEMculturepodcast.com](https://stemculturepodcast.com) for our show notes, any references that we might have mentioned in the episode, and any information about our guests and contributors.

Brooke 32:47

If you like what we're doing, please please please support us on Patreon. We have two tiers right now a \$1 and a \$5. At the \$1 you get a warm fuzzy feeling and a thank you in our show notes and at \$5 you get access to extra Patreon content and our undying love. Everything we get from Patreon goes back into the show and not into our pockets.

Dani 33:09

You can find Katie on Twitter at krwedemeyer (K-R-W-E-D-E-M-E-Y-E-R) or on LinkedIn. We'll post links in our show notes.

Brooke 33:19

Until next time, don't forget to consensually hug a grad student, or at least buy them a coffee, a chai latte, or like Katie said, hold a grad student up while they're sinking.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>