



Reflections on Being a Higher Education Researcher, a University Rector and a Member of EARLI: An Interview with Sari Lindblom

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Abstract

Sari Lindblom is Professor of Higher Education at the Centre for University Teaching and Learning (HYPE) and Rector of the University of Helsinki. In the past, she served as President of EARLI (European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction) and WERA (World Education Research Association) and has been actively involved in several international research projects. She authored over 200 articles, book chapters, and books mainly in the field of higher education that have influenced researchers, instructors, and learners worldwide. In her research, she addresses a wide range of topics related to student learning and teaching at university: approaches to learning and teaching, self-regulation, motivation to studying, assessment practices, and quality enhancement in higher education. In this interview, she elaborates on her career, her involvement in EARLI, and her current and future research.

Keywords: Sari Lindblom; Interview; Academic Career; Higher Education; EARLI

I. Personal Career & Own Motivations

1. How and why did you start your academic career as a researcher?

Stefan T. Siegel: Thank you for taking the time, Sari, I appreciate that very much. Let's start without further ado with the first question – it's about your career and your motivations: How and why did you start your academic career as a researcher?

Sari Lindblom: That was a very long time ago, but I had the idea to at least try to pursue an academic career. I think I was quite certain about doing that even before I completed my master's degree just because I liked doing research, finding new problems, and also solutions to problems. I have always been personally interested in doing research, and I also like teaching – so I think that a university career suited me very well. Regarding my background, I'm a psychologist, a licensed psychologist. I think at some point during my master's degree I thought about what my life would be if I just worked as a clinical psychologist, but soon it became very clear to me that I would personally be better suited for a university career. I graduated from the University of Helsinki and ever since I have worked here – so a very kind of boring career in a way.

Selecting a research area was probably more work for me, and there were a lot of coincidences. I was strongly influenced by a studying colleague who had had also been interested in doing research. I think, in many cases in the university career is something that you cannot plan very much ahead. You can make sure that you are motivated and committed to do research and supervise future researchers and so on, but then I think after that my career has been kind of full of unplanned things and I just happened to be in the right places at the right time. But I think being an academic and being a researcher has just suited me and that's why I'm still here.

2. What would you consider your most memorable early career accomplishment?

Stefan T. Siegel: Very interesting, thank you very much for your insights. What would you consider your most memorable early career accomplishment?

Sari Lindblom: I attended my first EARLI conference in 1991 in Turku when I was still a doctoral student and that was handy because it was in Finland and our very small research group with Kirsti Lonka didn't have much funding. So it was easy to travel to Turku and stay there. That was important for me: I saw famous researchers such as Ference Marton or Noel Entwistle presenting in real-life and this was a huge thing for me – to see these persons of whom I have read so many publications. Maybe that's my first memory.

Then the other memory relates to SIG04 Higher Education because it had been founded in Nijmegen in 1995, during the EARLI conference where we collected 20 names, which was the requirement at that time and I was one of the persons signing that list.

I also became a coordinator for a time and of course, it was very memorable when I became president-elect for EARLI. And then I did my presidency. Those are the most important memories, for me, but EARLI has been important for me in terms of anything related to my academic career because at that time not much research existed on higher education, especially in the university context. Inside the EARLI community, it was possible to find like-minded people interested in the same issues that were kind of forcing you right from the beginning of your career to think and act internationally and to build international networks. So, that's why EARLI has been important for me.

3. Tell us about a person or mentor who made an impact on you or set you on your present path?

Stefan T. Siegel: Speaking of like-minded people – did you have a person or a mentor who had a major impact on you and set you on your present path?

Sari Lindblom: Many, many: I already mentioned Ference Marton, Noel Entwistle whom I got to know very well. Then later during my PhD project, Jan Meyer from the University of Cape Town in South Africa had an important impact on my PhD. He had the idea of students representing a kind of a dissonant approach to studying: Somewhere in the mid-90s, he suggested that in contrast to the differentiation between deep learning and surface learning, there are students who do both at the same time, that they combine memorizing creating understanding. Here also the discussions with Ference Marton of “a Chinese paradox” were really important for me and my doctoral thesis. And, of course, Jan Vermunt from the Netherlands, has had a crucial impact on my academic career and then, but also a lot of other colleagues, for example, Keith Trigwell and Michael Prosser from Australia. With them, I did research on university teachers. And for a short period, I was a visiting scholar at the University of Oxford when Keith Trigwell was working there. But there were many other important people, a lot of people but I will stop here.

And I think SIG04 Higher Education has been a really good context to getting to know like-minded people who were interested in researching higher education and I think that is key. When I took my doctoral students with me to conferences I always said to them that I'm not going to spend all the time with them. During conferences, I introduced them to important that were close to their research areas, but then they had to create their own links. I've really tried to push my students to create their own international networks, which I consider very important. And, of course, it has always been motivating to talk to young researchers from different countries. So in this respect, I think EARLI is a wonderful network of young researchers as well as very experienced scholars from different continents and different countries, and when we come together it's a wonderful network.

II. Research in your Field & Future Research

4. What have been major changes in the field of student learning at university since you have been working on it?

Stefan T. Siegel: I would definitely agree. Let's move on to the second field: your research, the research in your field, and also your future research, what would you consider the major changes in the field of student learning at university, since you have been working on it?

Sari Lindblom: I started with a very traditional way of looking at students' approaches to learning, and the idea of dissonance in students studying profiles. I have also done research on the quality of student learning and quality of teaching, assessment, assessment practices. But if I think of what I'm doing lately, in particular, before I moved to an entirely different position, namely being the leader or the president of the University of Helsinki, I moved more towards doing research on self-efficacy beliefs. I've done quite a lot of research on workload and the well-being of university students and then also looked at individual study paths – so all in all too drastic changes concerning my research interests. I have tried to focus on what's happening in the life of students at university and then, I have done quite a lot of research on transitions: from upper secondary school to university, from the bachelor to master degree and the transition into the working life.

All in all, I think my research interests are quite broad, not just mine, but also those of my doctoral students. I had a big research group so and I think we have covered almost everything in the higher education context, in the university context. One thing I'd like to add – I would also like to mention my research on academic emotions because at that time it was a really fresh and new idea to find out what kind of academic emotions arise among students but also staff members while teaching and learning in higher education.

5. In your opinion, what will be the most important questions you are continuing to work on? What are your next goals regarding your research?

Stefan T. Siegel: In your opinion, what will be the most important questions you're continuing to work on, and what are your next goals regarding your research?

Sari Lindblom: That's a really difficult question because this is my sixth year in the rectorate of the University of Helsinki. In 2017, I first became vice-rector for teaching and learning quality. So that was a position that wonderfully fitted my research area and during this period I continued doing research. Now I still try to do research, but now I've been the rector of the University of Helsinki for two years and there's hardly a chance to do that anymore. However, I have doctoral students that I supervise. But I think the idea is that the rector of a university is not supposed to do any activities like that, but I wouldn't and couldn't move my doctoral students to another supervisor. So I have doctoral students which are probably today my most important link to actually conducting research because they do and I have the privilege to analyze data with them and write articles. I follow very closely what kind of research they do

at the Center for University Teaching and Learning, which I used to lead as a director when I was a professor.

I don't know what happens in the future, but sometimes I dream of going back to being a regular professor and it might be happy – you'll never know. Until now, most of the research on students and teachers in the university is based on self-reports: either we use inventories or we conduct interviews, but they are all, of course, self-reports. And then we can make use of student data, for instance, their selection of minors and these kinds of things, how they accumulate their credits. But what we have been doing lately is to try to figure out what would be suitable physiological measures. And this is something I think can bring very good additional data to the kind of versatile data set, we are already collecting. We have done research with smart rings such as the one by Moodmetrics and the other one by Oura. It measures the sweat in your hand or your palms which might indicate your level of activity or the quality of your sleep or how you recover from stress. I think that these physiological measures are very promising and if I ever go back to become a professor, I would like to continue to follow that path of research. I have always taken care that we always collect data from multiple sources. I think a multi-method approach is important because when you conduct research in higher education (probably on any topic), you always look at real life, and you cannot put students or teachers in a laboratory setting because when you do that, you change basic idea of teaching and learning at university. So that is why I think we need multiple data sources. All this makes research designs very complex, but I think that's the only option we have to adequately capture teaching and learning processes at university.

As I'm a psychologist I have had this feeling for maybe the last 10 years or so that I would like to go back to my roots and conduct more psychological research on topics like procrastination, self-efficacy beliefs stress, workload, well-being. I'm quite sure that my future research would focus on these topics.

III. Involvement in EARLI & Advice for Young Scholars

6. What does being a part of the EARLI mean to you?

Stefan T. Siegel: Let's move on to our final area: your involvement in EARLI. Although you've already mentioned it – what did and does being a part of EARLI mean to you, and what were your most memorable experiences?

Sari Lindblom: If I think of my career as a researcher, EARLI has meant everything to me. EARLI has been really important. I have been very selective regarding associations and conferences. I rarely participated in other conferences unless I had a keynote. I have always prioritized EARLI. Of course, while I was President of WERA, the World Education Research Association – during that time I attended many conferences around the world, but I always have had the feeling of coming home, when I went to EARLI conferences.

7. Could you give some valuable advice for future higher education researchers?

Stefan T. Siegel: Could you give some advice for future higher education researchers or the junior members of our SIG04 community?

Sari Lindblom: Throughout my career, I think, I have given quite a lot of advice, because many young researchers have contacted me during conferences or even by email. EARLI has had the very nice tradition to organize meet-the-professors-lunches. For some reason, I seem to collect especially young female researchers around me. And very often during these lunches or at the conferences, we have talked a lot about combining work or research to other dimensions of life. Especially when we talk about female researchers it's about whether to have a family and how to combine this with your academic career. This has been one of the most important points. You cannot only concentrate on your academic career; you also need to have something else in your life and I, of course, I have personal experience in that, because when I graduated with my master's degree I already had two children and when I defended my doctoral thesis I had three. So I know quite well how it is being worried about whether anybody would want to hire you because you have been at home with children for a longer period. In Finland, there is a clear trend that also young fathers do take care of their children, almost as much as mothers and I think that is an important trend. My main message would be: Don't only concentrate on your work. You need to have a balanced life to be able to do research at a high level.

Another piece of advice would be to be active: I have always told young researchers to be active, to talk to people at conferences, or to tell researchers that you read their articles and start an exchange. Here the international EARLI community is very valuable. Talking to people from different countries and also to people with different theoretical and methodological backgrounds is also very important.

I would also recommend young scholars to develop broad skills apart from conducting research to be able to survive in the hard competition in academia for instance by committing yourself to societal positions, especially when they are important in terms of your research area. This would be important advice from my point of view because I have seen very, very talented young scholars, who only did research and then, they didn't get certain positions they wanted because they lacked other skills needed at university.

But above all, my advice would be to form strong networks and I here I already mentioned the importance of for example the EARLI or the SIG04 conferences. Those have always been my highlights. And I think that it's really good that we have every other year big conferences. Unfortunately, I couldn't participate very actively in Gothenburg because of my tight schedule, but I hope to be able to come to the next EARLI conferences.

Stefan T. Siegel: Thank you very much for the elucidating interview, your insights, and your advice for the members of our community. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

Sari Lindblom: It was my pleasure, Stefan. Have a wonderful day.

Interviewpartners

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