Foreword

I'm going to tell you about this book indirectly, starting with something about myself and my experience of reading these essays. But if you are impatient to get on with it, here's the gist: this collection is something rare and important for the discipline of librarianship, and I hope you are as surprised, stirred, and delighted while reading these essays as I have been.

I have been helping undergraduates learn how to find, use, create, and share information for nearly three decades. You would think, with all that practice, I should know what I'm doing, but one of the questions that continues to elude me is how to convince students that they have a voice and something important to say, when at the same time I'm introducing them to scholarly conversations that are conducted in a certain way, using a particular vocabulary, to discuss certain kinds of questions, using a process that defines validity and authority in highly specific ways. I struggle to figure out how to invite them to join a conversation already in progress while persuading them they can safely challenge the rules that seem to have been constructed entirely apart from their own lived experience.

My problem dates back to the beginning of my work in academic librarianship. In my first or second year, I attended an interdisciplinary pedagogy conference, one that I've completely forgotten other than a fragment of a talk. I'm pretty sure the speaker was Joseph Williams, a writing scholar at the University of Chicago, talking about initiating students into scholarly discourse communities. He drew a set of ascending steps to illustrate his point, reminding me of the imposing architectural features that make so many iconic libraries inaccessible both literally and figuratively. Something about that word *initiate* bothered me, and I began a counter-discourse in my head. What if students didn't want to be initiated? What if the things they cared about were disparaged by these communities or simply ignored? How many different communities were undergraduates supposed to join in the course of their general education? What was in it for them, other than better grades and a capacity to imitate? Is coaching students to mimic the social life and customs of academia the best

way for academics to give students a good education and serve the public good? Why aren't their communities as important as the ones we insist they adapt themselves to? Today, I would be releasing those thoughts into a Twitter backchannel, but back then all I could do was fume and scribble long-lost notes with lots of exclamation points.

But I had to admit even then that discourse communities are real and introducing students to them was work I had to participate in, whatever my reservations. There's a practical need for writing instructors and librarians to help students navigate the unfamiliar expectations for reading, speaking, and writing that they will be required to perform in college. We owe it to our students to unpack and explain the tacit rules their professors often forget their students don't know. Students have a lot more to lose than they did when college was more affordable, so the urgency for providing those basic survival skills, particularly for first-generation students, is more pressing than ever, even if acquiring those skills disempowers them from using their own voices as they learn how to blend into a culture that they will be part of for a few short years but that holds enormous power over their future.

Apart from the practical need to have the skills to conform to academic culture so long as they are enrolled in college, there's a much deeper kind of learning that has value beyond academia but that can become hidden behind a thicket of unfamiliar rules and language. Academic practices encode values and modes of understanding that are valuable. Conducting fieldwork ethically, developing sound experiments, examining evidence dispassionately, crafting arguments fairly, seeking context for deeper understanding—these are all useful and practical tools for making sense of a confusing world, tools graduates can take with them into the world as they build their lives and perhaps build a better world. Though these tools may have evolved out of a particular intellectual tradition that comfortably ignored the humanity of enslaved people and colonial subjects while promoting individual liberty and the wealth of nations, they can help us understand, and they are in short supply in an era of political polarization, micro-targeting of marketing messages, social isolation, and cultural myopia. Minimizing the trivial—correct citations, avoidance of the first person pronoun, the ability to use disciplinary terminology

fluently—while exposing the underlying epistemological foundations for knowledge making is difficult when so much is at stake and the trivial is easier to state clearly on the syllabus.

As I think about this problem of authenticity and belonging, I wander further back in my memory. I was without question a weird undergraduate, bored and restless during lectures, terrible at multiple-choice tests, and not receptive to anything that didn't immediately pique my interest, but I was always quick to flip through syllabi on the first day of a semester to see what kind of paper we'd get to write. I enjoyed writing, and I loved the freedom of being able to choose a subject to learn about. When I was a junior or senior, I took an upper-division art history course that was cross-listed for graduate credit. I found the grad students long-winded, overserious, and prone to competitive name-dropping to show how erudite they were, so I deliberately wrote a paper that was as stuffed with as many big words as I could squeeze in. It was a performance, and though I enjoyed the research, the paper itself was an ironic act. (Of course, I didn't tell the professor it was an elaborate joke. He gave me an A.)

At about the same time, I found myself in a panic over another paper. Though I loved art history, I was majoring in Russian literature and taking a special topics course from a Dostoevsky expert who shocked me when he announced he would skip over *The Idiot*, my favorite novel. He couldn't figure out how it fit in the body of the author's work, and besides, he just didn't *get* it. I went up after class to challenge him, and he asked why I thought it was so important. I stammered, and he grinned and said, "Why don't you write your paper about it?"

I knew I was good at writing papers and pretty much had the identity "college student" down cold by the time I took this course, but this challenge threw me completely. I procrastinated and looked for help in the stacks and grew increasingly nervous as the deadline loomed. Normally, I could knock out a paper quickly, but none had ever mattered as much. I had to persuade my teacher that this was a great novel, the *best* novel, one that was the key to everything Dostoevsky wrote. None of the books or articles I'd found provided an explanation I could quote because they didn't get it right either. I was on my own.

Finally, out of time, I started writing in desperation, not having any organizing idea in mind. But one came to me as soon as I started to write. It was as if putting my pen on a sheet of paper made a live connection crackle to life, an arc of pure energy leaping between two ideas, igniting a genuine research question. I scribbled my ideas as fast as they came, flipping through my copy of the novel feverishly, on fire to prove my theory, looking up supporting material whenever a gap needed filling. It was exhilarating, and it changed my teacher's mind about the book. But it did much more: it changed my mind about what a person could do with ideas. It fused a personal passion with my academic identity and gave me a chance to speak in a voice of my own.

That's the kind of experience I long for students to have—a chance to investigate a question that genuinely matters to them, to say something in their own voice, something that isn't formulaic, that hasn't been said before so it can be cited. Learning how to sound academic in and of itself doesn't prepare students to be anything but effective mimics. It may gain them admission to the scholarly conversation and practice entering other unfamiliar discourse communities, but it doesn't really give them permission to turn the conversation in a new direction or to apply the tools of inquiry to their own lives and communities.

These days, being a librarian, a disciplinary border crosser, helps me empathize with students as disciplinary outsiders. I'm often asked to help students do research in fields I know nothing about, which gives me a chance to show off my own ignorance and model the idea that not knowing is an invitation to explore rather than a shameful deficit. I enjoy helping students decode the academy and think critically about how our own systems of knowledge organization are shaped by assumptions. Why do you suppose the books about women are shelved right after the books about families? Why sexuality is shelved so close to criminology? Why the relevance ranking in library databases is less personalized and powerful than Google's? Cracking the code makes these systems human, makes them something we can act upon. This is work I care about.

My introduction to this book came in the form of an e-mail message. Did I want to join a community exploring the use of autoeth-

nography for LIS research? I wasn't sure about that. Ethnographic methods were intriguing to me, but I had never heard of autoethnography, and *auto* made me nervous. I'm a private person who grew up in the Midwest, where it isn't proper to call attention to yourself. I didn't have anything I was burning to say about myself in relation to the field. But I was intrigued enough to join.

Anne-Marie Deitering, Bob Schroeder, and Rick Stoddart created a learning community online that was the starting place for this collection. They created a fascinating model for conducting original and highly individual research as a community. We had a site where we could raise questions and discuss common readings, a shared documents folder, a schedule of conversations with experts, and opportunities to share ideas, concerns, reservations, half-finished drafts, and moments of existential angst. I've contributed to edited volumes before, but never belonged to a living community that learned together like this. It's a model that I hope others will follow.

But even while enjoying these experiences, I wasn't entirely sure what autoethnography had to offer our discipline until I began to see the drafts of these essays for the first time. They are enormously diverse. The book contains a variety of voices, many of them voices we're not supposed to use in the workplace, expressions of individual personalities we are usually expected to repress in the name of professionalism. Reading them one after the other produces a refreshing and often surprising experience. Can you say that? Is this sort of writing allowed? Are you sure you want that information to be public? At the same time, I experienced frequent moments of recognition—yes, that's my experience too. This method gives us the chance to approach and name things that are so common they get overlooked. They question the idea that stepping outside of oneself somehow creates "neutrality" where none exists and can pull back the curtain on the production of knowledge to show its humanity. Some of these essays also retreat deep inside to retrieve something to share, creating an unusual closeness with the reader. And they enable new and illuminating ways to express ideas that range from how to lay out an argument in the form of a graphic novel to speculative fiction to rigorous and often moving examination of the archives of one's life.

Librarians encountering the idea of autoethnography for the first time as they page through this volume may feel some of the confusion I felt at the beginning of this process. What is the value of studying one's own self? What will we learn when the lenses we use to do research are turned on our lived experience? How invasive will that process be, and will it count as scholarship? Will treating the personal with academic rigor somehow render it sterile and dull—or exaggerate its importance under a methodological microscope? What contribution could this approach make to the field of librarianship?

I hope readers will feel the same kind of rising excitement as they read this volume as I did when reading those drafts. "Oh, *that's* what it looks like in practice. This is what we can learn. Who knew we could take on library questions in such different ways?" And "What a lot we have to gain by opening the door to different forms of reflective writing, to experience the diversity of voices among us."

I hope you'll begin to see how much we can do if we clear away the trivial aspects of research practice—the ones that caution us not to ask genuine questions if the answers can't be put into charts, the rules of writing that wrap our ideas in a tight straitjacket of introduction, methods, results, discussion—and instead revel in the value of doing serious research into our lived experience that is ethical, questioning, and open to experiment.

—Barbara Fister