Episode 79: Anne-Marie Deitering

# KL: Katie Linder

# AMD: Anne-Marie Deitering

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode seventy-nine.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by Anne-Marie Deitering, the Associate University Librarian for Learning Services at Oregon State University Libraries and Press. Anne-Marie oversees the library’s teaching and engagement, library experience and access, and assessment departments and also oversees the Guin Library at the Hatfield Marine Science Center. She blogs at info-fetishist and Tweets as @amlibrarian.

**KL:** Thanks so much for joining me in the studio today, Anne-Marie.

**AMD:** Thanks for having me!

**KL:** So I am super excited to talk with you about autoethnography, because I’ve dabbled in research but, you know, not as much as I would like, and I’d love to hear more. So for our listeners who may not be familiar with this method, let’s just start with a definition. How would you define autoethnography?

**AMD:** So, autoethnography is a reflexive qualitative method where the researcher is examining themselves as the subject of inquiry. So the researcher is the subject, the subject is the researcher. And a lot of the actual data collection and analysis, that varies pretty tremendously so that the one very core of it is that the researcher is examining themselves and their own experience.

**KL:** So you use the word reflexive, which I am very familiar with as someone who was trained in feminist research methodology, but I am wondering if you could talk a little bit about reflexive versus reflective? Which I think, you know, we often hear and maybe conflate. Can you differentiate between the two?

**AMD:** Not very well. It’s one of those words that I started using before I fully understood it, um and it’s one of those words where I understood there was a difference and I think the way I see it, it’s frequently used synonomously with reflective, which just is um- which I think means primarily that the people using it are being sloppy. Not that there is no distinction, but when I think about the distinction between the two or when I think about reflexive, what I am thinking about is that back and forth. That one is informing the other, and then back again. As opposed to reflective which can really be more uni-directional. How do you distinguish it?

**KL:** I would say the same thing, because when I think about reflective I think of it as a one way thing. Like you’re applying something to something else, whereas with reflective it seems more cyclical to me. Um but it’s come up on the show before, and it’s one of those words that gets thrown around, and I’m always curious to hear what people think about it, because I think sometimes, like you said, we use this language and we use it for so long that we don’t always delve into the definitional details of it.

**AMD:** I think so, absolutely. And when I think about reflection, and the work that I do on reflection, which is actually the larger umbrella um that encompasses most of the work that I do, I’m thinking about critical reflection which has that double loop aspect to it. So for me that distinction gets really, really blurry sometimes.

**KL:** Interesting. Alright. So, what are some of the benefits for you of autoethnography? What draws you to that method?

**AMD:** So when I was initially looking at the method, which was um, like you I sort of had a general idea of what it was and I had heard of it, but it wasn’t anything I thought about seriously. Um what drew me to it was in part skepticism and distrust. I felt like if there was something I was reacting to that way I should look at it more, because I was in a period of my life when I was really trying to look at things that were making me uncomfortable and question some of my own assumptions. So that probably wasn’t the answer you were looking for. What draws me to it is that I was a little distrustful and skeptical of it. Um –

**KL:** But you know, I think that’s important. That’s what drew me to online education! It’s a part of the research that I do. I came with a very skeptical eye. I mean I actually think that’s really beneficial.

**AMD:** I agree. I completely agree. Yes. Everything – almost everything that I did in that year, which was, “Let’s question our assumptions about things that make us uncomfortable” turned out really, really well for me. I’ll just say that. Um but autoethnography, what appeals to me now, 3 years later after spending um really almost three years pretty immersed in thinking about it and thinking around the edges of it, is there’s some general things about it that appeal to me, but a lot of what appeals to me is very specific to my situation as a librarian researcher. Um my larger question, the thing that’s been in my head almost sense I started in librarianship and started thinking about research in librarianship, is not really the distinction between theory and practice, because I find most conversations about that distinction to be problematic, but really the idea that librarians are doing researcher for different reasons, to inform different type of work than a lot of other researchers. And academic librarians end up being in this very strange position because we are kind of embedded, we’re soaking in the work that a lot of other researchers do. Research that’s designed to generate new knowledge that’s going to, that’s going to generate further knowledge, but we are trying to inform knowledge in that environment, and so that tension becomes very vivid sometimes. And so about, oh I don’t even know how many years ago now, maybe ten year ago, I started working on the idea of reflective practice, and I was informed by Donald Shon, he’s a reflective practitioner, and his idea of reflection in action and reflection on action, right? And so usually when we’re thinking about reflection we’re thinking about reflection on action, we’re going to be out of the moment, and reflect back on our experience, and think about what it means, and learn from it, and so on, and so on. But he’s really interested in his body of work and that idea, how do practitioners know what they know? How do professionals know what they know? And he argues that there’s this large body of experiential knowledge that a good practitioner is drawing on all the moment- sometimes even in the moment subconsciously, right? And it- the two inform each other. The better we are at reflecting after the moment, the better we are – the more adapted we are at accessing that knowledge in the moment. That really resonated with me. That idea really resonated with me. So that idea of reflecting on practice as a way to inform practice knowledge in a – as a thing that was somewhat different from theoretical knowledge or research for, you know, fully generating new knowledge, um has really been a part of how – the lens that I have applied to research all along. So that was kind of a long introduction to say that autoethnography is kind of the natural culmination of that. Autoethnogrpahy is a rigorous, structured push to that kind of critical reflection on practice. But that honors that experiential situatedness of practice, the way practice happens in a place and can’t be fully understood without understanding the relationships, and the dynamics, and the specifics of that place.

**KL:** I’m fascinated. So one of the ways that I have seen some autoethnography presented is in the form of kind of a personal essay, which I think for a lot of academics is like, “whoa there.” that makes a lot of people uncomfortable! But I know that it’s not always presented that way, but I’m curious if you could also help us to distinguish between, you know, when is it a personal autoethnography and when is it not? Because obviously there are a lot of personal essays that are not using this method in the kind of rigorous, strategic way that you have talked about.

**AMD:** Absolutely. One of my colleagues describes it as the difference between autobiography and autoethnography which I think is getting at what you’re talking about there. Um I should say as a caveat that the book that just came out this week, which is a collection of autoethnographies by librarians that I edited, I am not sure all of the pieces in that book are going to match the description that I’m about to give you. So a big part of that project was figuring out what this can look like, and I can talk more about what that means um in a bit, but it’s true that I am going to say something, and I think that if you read every piece of that book you would think some of them don’t quite fit this [Okay]. But it’s the ethno part of it. It’s the connection to some kind of culture. And that’s actually a topic that we went around, and around, and around in our learning community about a lot. What exactly that means, and what exactly that looks like. I ended up - probably not surprisingly to anyone who knows me with the very expansive idea of what that means. Some people would say that that connection to culture really needs to be theoretical, it needs to be big teeth theory, and if you don’t have that theoretical lens then you’re not doing ethnography, and therefore you’re not doing autoethnogrphy. I think of it as something much broader. I think that the connections you can make can be two other pieces of research. I think the connections you make could be to maybe traditional data gathering, you know; I did a survey, I did an authoethnography, I connected the two. I think the connections you can make – one of the autoethnographies in my um book, that I think some people would probably wonder if this is really an autoethnography, um she took a very archival and historical approach. Somebody described it as a deep dive into the archives of her own life. I’m a former historian, so to me that’s a very familiar form of research. That’s a very familiar form of kind of looking outward. Um so I thought it was, but I think that’s one that would probably blur. So the short answer, after giving the long answer, which you’ve probably already figured out is my M.O, um is that it needs to look both inward and outward. And most good autoethnographies will do that in kind of a spiral or a cyclical shape. Some will look inward and some will look outward, but many will weave back and forth between those two lenses.

**KL:** This just makes me want to read more autoethnography. It’s been a long time since I’ve dipped into that, and it makes me want to go back. So as you’re talking, I can also imagine that there are some other challenges. And you have said that you came to this skeptically and I can imagine there’s lots of people who would say, “Okay. There’s got to be some limitations here.” What are some of the challenges to the methodology that you found?

**AMD:** So there’s, I can put them into a few buckets, and the ones that I find the most interesting, and the things that I could probably talk the most about are actually the personal challenges to doing it. Um and I think those are easily the most interesting. But I think we have to at least nod to the fact that there are a lot of people out there that would not consider this research. That it just doesn’t fit any of the, um, the assumptions; the epistemological assumptions they have about how knowledge is created and that somehow it’s always going to seem less valid. And so if you take on this method, you have to be doing it with it with an eye to knowing why you’re doing it, but also how it’s going to be received. So there is definitely a challenge there, and I think that if you don’t do a lot of preliminary work and thinking about why you’re doing it, what the value is, and what the value is as opposed to other methods um then you’re probably going to run into some trouble on the other end. Now I’m someone who thinks any researcher should be that rigorous about the method they choose and be able to describe it, and I think that all research should be questioned in that way, but I’m also a realist and I know that if your research looks familiar and follows certain conventions then some of those questions are likely to - they just won’t happen. So the autoethnographer though is going to get them. Probably from people who aren’t researchers. So that – that’s one piece of it. That’s one piece of challenge. Um but the other piece really comes from the subjective in situated nature of it. Any qualitative researcher has to grapple with this, and anyone who has thought about research, I think critically, has already thought about that; that question of whether the researcher can be truly objective. That’s sort of the foundational, fundamental, at the core of all of our conversations about research at least in the west, right? I mean it’s just there, and we’ve thought about it. Um but, there’s a lot that I think about autoethography that I think seems like it would be easier, because you are looking at yourself, that in fact can be substantially harder, because when you’re not seeing your subjectivities, when you’re not able to pull them out and analyze them – um it’s much, much harder to do it. You know, the old trope that, “I can fix everybody else’s problems but my own! I can therapize all of my friends, but I am a mess!” That kind of thing. So that’s a really important part of it, that’s a really important part of the challenge. Another really important personal challenge that I think people need to understand when they go in is, you’re going to find things that you’re not happy with and that you don’t like. Either about you, about people you like, I mean, there’s just all kinds of ways you can come to conclusions that you don’t particularly like. And the emotional toll of autoethnography can be pretty significant, so that would be another challenge. The last thing I’ll mention, and we can dig into any of these, obviously, is um reviewing it is hard. It’s a very different reviewing experience, one that I don’t think I full thought through when I went in. I knew I was going to be a hands on editor, um I knew that were we’re going to be editing each other and that the learning community would help, but at the end of the day, reviewing somebody else’s experience is a challenge that I don’t think we have a lot of practice in, and I don’t think we have a lot of tools for.

**KL:** Mhm. So speaking of tools, and I want to kind of dig into to a little bit more about the book, and we will link it in the show notes for people who are interested, and I’m certainly adding it to my “to read” pile. Um I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about the specific kind of tools or strategies that are used for this work. Whether you’ve used them for yourself, or you’ve seen them in this collection, you know, as you’ve been talking to people. And I think, I mean, immediately what I think a lot about is stuff like journaling, you know, and doing that kind of reflective work, and reflexive work, as we talked about earlier – um and I’ll point listeners to an episode we have of on journaling, Research in Action, which I’ll link to in the show notes. But I imagine there must be lots of different kinds of tools, so I’m wondering if you could speak to that?

**AMD:** Absolutely, there are tons of tools, um and one of them, um the strengths and the challenges of the method is that it’s not a clearly defined method. There is a not a, “follow these six steps and you will have an autoethnography at the end of it out there!” Well there might be, but I think it would be pretty wretched. Um so, autoethnographers, someone described it as an eclectic bricolage of methods; is how autoethnography works. And what they tend to do is adapt methods, data collection methods, or data compiling methods drawn from other context. So journaling is absolutely a really important component of it, and that can take a couple of forms, I mean, you can be journaling, knowing you’re going to autoethnographize what you’re going to do, or knowing that you might, because you never know what you’re going to get there, but knowing that you might. Or people will use their journals from the past as a way to kind of check their memory, and to maybe analyze and code those journals just as they would interview transcripts, or if they’re historians someone else’s journals, and things like that. So that is definitely a piece of it. Um some use – when they’re doing that sort of forward looking journaling, they actually use the language field notes to talk about what they’re doing. They keep field notes while they’re doing it, and that’s one of the pieces of data that they look at. The people in the book did all kinds of things. Like I said one of the people had um went through kind of the ephemera of her professional life that she had kept over the years; old magazines, and pieces that she’d written, and communities that she had belonged to and things like that. One person who didn’t actually produce a narrative because of other things, was planning to code her Twitter – was going to ask for her Twitter archive and then was going to code that. Someone did a systematic analysis of their calendar, like their Outlook calendar, and the coding that they had done, but also what they had done – what they had done with heir labeling and the things they had gone to, and the meetings that they had. Um so those are just some of the examples of data gathering that people did. There were some people who did some interviews, went to talk to colleagues and then compared three different accounts of the same event. Things like that. One of the conversations that we had, that is going a little beyond your question because there’s no good tool for this I don’t think, is the role of memory, and how you A.) Use memory, and then B.) Use your memory critically, and how you really think about, and how we know our memories of things change. There are some pieces out there that people have written about sort of writing through your memories multiple times, and things like that – so I guess I lied. There are some tools even about the idea of using memory. Um so yeah. There’s a lot of different methods and tools out there, and a surprising number of autoethnographies about writing autoethnographies.

**KL:** Okay well I’m going to have to get a list of these things so we can out them in the show notes, because if our readers are even half as intrigued by these as I am they’re going to want to follow up on this.

**AMD:** So we do have a website to accompany the book that does have a reading and resources section [Ah, great!]. So some of these things are on it, some aren’t, but I can also keep adding to it as I remember more things that – that sparked people.

**KL:** Awesome, and we will link to that in the show notes as well! We’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’re going to hear a little bit more from Anne-Marie about researching as a librarian. Back in a moment!

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Anne-Marie, as someone who deeply loves libraries, and always has, and I – I just have a special place in my heart for librarians. I feel like I probably in a past life was a librarian, or in a future life will be a librarian! Um I want you to talk a little bit about your pathway to becoming a librarian researcher, because I know not all librarians are even academic librarians, you know, this is not always the case. And here at Oregon State we do have a tenure track system for our librarians, which I think is um true on some campuses, not true on others. So can you talk a little bit about you pathway?

**AMD:** Sure. Yeah. You’re absolutely right that all librarians don’t do research and that all librarians aren’t – for a lot of librarians it’s not part of the job. Even those who have a tenure line position usually don’t have the training in a discipline – um in a specific set of disciplinary methods that other people would have. Um it is true at Oregon State that we have tenure lines here, and there is a research component to that. That’s actually more common among land grant universities than other universities, and I have some untested theories about why that is, but I think one piece of that is that land grant universities have always embraced people who do research for many different reasons. So we are doing research to inform practice, we are doing research to improve, you know, agriculture, to improve what happens out on the farms, what happens in the fields, as well as what happens in the labs, and what happens in the libraries, and the archives, and things like that. And so there’s always been that baked into the land grant mission, so I think that’s one reason why librarians at land grant schools are more likely to be a part of that, because they’re already thinking very broadly about the importance of research and society. So my path was fairly typical in that it was the second um, it was a second career for me, or at least it was kind of the direction I took out of my first career. I came to librarianship in my 30s, which again was a fairly common story. Especially when I did it. I started out in history that was what I was going to do. I came out of undergrad with a history degree where I had done a thesis in research and wanted to go on to be a history professor, but when I was in my history program um there were a couple red flags. I enjoyed teaching a period of time that wasn’t the period of time I enjoyed researching, which is always a red flag. I didn’t go in with a passion for a particular time period, or a particular um research question for a dissertation. I excelled in coursework, I did really good original research, but as soon as I was done I was kind of moving on. I mean, I was almost too much of a dilettante; I was too interested in too many things. And reflecting back it became really, really clear to me that I was teaching information literacy in the history classroom much more than I was teaching – the way I usually describe it is if all of my students – if a student in their essay got every date 500 years off, I wouldn’t care, because they connected all of the events correctly, right? But you’re kind of supposed to care if the dates are 500 years off, and I think it’s important that some people do. I was not that person. I always felt like I was teaching the history buff that student was going to be when they were 35, more than I was teaching the student in my classroom at that moment. And so I stalled out during my qualifying exams, um and I thought it was because I was too focused on them, and so I went and got an eight hour a week job at the circulation desk at the public library to get out of my head for a little – for a few hours a week. And for six months I was working 24 hours a week at the public library, I was teaching classes, I was working at the reference desk. Took me another six months to decide to switch to librarianship, because you finish what you start, but it become pretty clear that was where I needed to be. So I came out of an academic program where I had been pretty strongly inculcated into a discipline, and into a way of knowing, and into a researcher’s mindset even though I wasn’t done. I was close enough that I had gotten through a lot of that conditioning and cultural knowledge. Um but, I came into librarianship voluntarily, positively, as a positive choice that this is what I want to be doing. And those two things are both important; it’s a lens. Especially history being such a broad lens, you know, anything in time is history, that it’s a lens that’s super helpful. The experience of really being um taught a way of doing research, and a way of doing that kind of work was really important to me, but also not turning to librarianship as a way to kind of do history, but as a way of kind of wanting to do librarianship positively. All of those things have been important to me coming in as a researcher. So I am very passionate about public libraries and I loved my experience in the public library, but I really just felt like my particular skill set, and my particular way of looking at things would probably be a better fit in academic libraries. And part of that was knowing that research and inquiry could still be a part of my professional life.

**KL:** So I’m glad you brought up this idea of disciplines, because I think that we don’t always think of librarianship as a discipline, and so I want to talk about that a little bit, and in particular related to your research, if there are particular methodologies, because you mentioned that there are librarians who are not trained as researchers. So are - is this something where you feel like in many interdisciplinary programs we might see this? You know? There’s this kind of merging or converging of different methods being used. Um do you consider librarianship as a discipline to be an interdisciplinary kind of program, or a multiple disciplinary kind of discipline?

**AMD:** So many questions. Yes, okay let me tease these out because there’s actually a few things in play here that I think are both important. The interdisciplinary piece I think is important, but I also think the professional piece is important and I want to talk about both of those things. So, librarian ship as a discipline is – it’s a contested question. It’s a question that people go back and forth on a lot, and a sub question of that is information literacy, which is what we tend to teach as librarians; is that a discipline. My feeling is, I don’t think of either of those things in a disciplinary way. I actually have kind of an old fashioned definition of discipline that I just sort of use to make sense of the world, and it is the application of a method, or a way of knowing, and that doesn’t work in a lot of fields, but it’s kind of my starting point. So those I don’t think of as disciplines. Information science I think probably is a discipline. So if there’s a discipline aligned with that field, that’s what I would call it, and there are some methods that are fairly unique to that discipline. Uh bibliometric analysis for example, really digging in and doing analyses on citation patterns, things like that. That’s pretty much - you’re only going to find that in that field. Um, but, like most of the social sciences, and particularly the interpretive social sciences, we pull theory and we pull method from all over the place. And I should add that my old fashion definition of method, probably also extends to theory. That’s where people tend to push back on me and say “I think there’s a body of theory informing the discipline, that’s another way of looking at it that’s probably true.” We don’t have either one. We’re pulling from a lot of different places in both of those. So the interdisciplinary part is definitely important. I’m not sure how different that makes us from other interpretive social sciences until you think about the training piece of it. Um but the professional part is important too, because we have a really, really, really specific way of thinking about theory and practice that – I think a lot of it comes from education, where you have schools of education, and you have schools of education that need to justify being schools of education with, and you have the people teaching that are different than the people teaching in the classroom, the people teaching the people in the classroom are different and all of that. And so this body of thinking about how that is supposed to work grew up as those schools of education did um back in the early part of the century, and that idea was that theory would happen there, that research happen there, that knowledge would be generated in the schools of education in the university, and that it would be applied in the classroom by the practitioners. And that informs social work, and that informs um librarianship, that informs even fields like nursing to a certain extent. Um and its – I think really problematic, it’s a really problematic thing. But if I were going to be drawing analogies, I would be drawing analogies to the other interpretive social sciences for sure, but I would also draw analogies to the way research tends to work in education. Where that – that theory practice challenge is one that that field is still grappling with, and so are we.

KL: Mhm. So we had mentioned earlier that not all of librarians are researchers and I think you’ve touched on this a little bit, but I would love to hear more about what is – what has been, you know, in terms of your choice for your own academic identity to be a researcher? Why has that been important for you?

**AMD:** Well, it’s important for a few reasons, um I – at the very beginning I sought out a professional space where I would be able to continue to do research, because I like it. I like research, I like inquiry, but it’s also a really important part of how inform my practice, is to do that, and it’s very hard for me to think about being a practitioner without that research component being supported. And frankly I felt very strongly that if I was going to be able to be asked to do research I wanted to do it in a place where I would be supported, because I didn’t want to do it just on my own. Um there’s justice issues around that that I felt really strongly about, even then. Um so that was one piece of it, but I also – and so part of the practical answer is just, “It’s part of the job here!” And so I do research because it’s a part of the job, but I think we’re a better library for it. I think that we are a very professionally active library, but that we are also having conversations about what that should look like, and having conversations about how we can look at that really broadly. We talk about how we can reward multiple types of conversations in the discipline. In the discipline and in the practitioner community, and how we can value those equally. Not every place is like that. So I really believe that we are a better library because we have people who are engaged in those conversations. Um I think it doesn’t just keep us fresh, but I think it helps us to be more critical in what we’re doing. And so I think it’s really important. Now, I don’t think that all research needs to look the same, I think librarianship is pretty timid when it comes to thinking about what our professional discourse should look like. Um I think we’re pretty focused on external standards, and external evaluations, and like I said very timid about it. That’s a concern I have. I don’t feel it so much here at Oregon State, Um but I do feel it in the broader profession.

**KL:** So you have this new book out, which we’ll be linking to in the show notes, and I’m wondering now that this is out – what is next for you? What are you looking toward next? Have you gotten to that place where you know what’s next?

**AMD:** I have some – some ideas about what’s next. The larger umbrella of my work, like I said before is critical reflective practice and how we can critically inform our practice, and that is always going to be the driving sort of force of my work. Um and so, I’m doing some work right now on the pedagogy side that are really digging into that – doing it here and then also thinking about ways that I can surface and be more transparent – those processes pieces. Sort of how my practice develops, and how I use theory, and how I use these different critical lenses to inform practice. Um I think I’ve spent a lot of time talking about why we should do that, but I think that some of the work that I’ve done with autoethnography is really bringing up some ideas about to make those things a little bit more visible to people. Um both in classrooms and in the workshops, but also in – on the page, and thinking about different ways of writing. I didn’t do an autoethnography for the autoethnography book. Leading – putting a learning community together, developing a new curriculum for that, and doing the editing was way too much, so I didn’t write one. And I do have an idea for one that I didn’t have before, um examining the – the connection or the role of optimism in organizational communication and things like that. There’s this – it’s not very well formed yet, but that’s one. My inability to journal though might hurt me on that one, but that’s one idea that I have. Um but the other thing that I would say is that I’m moving more deeply into an administrative position now, and it’s probably not surprising that a lot of my thoughts are turning to questions that are different than the questions when I was focusing primarily on teaching. And so I am thinking about the question of how managers make decisions, and I think the qualitative methods in general, are going to be a really important way of getting out that. There’s surveys out there already and thinking where managers, you know, talk out, and rank different things. And there’s plenty in things like psychology; trying to sort of identify types of decision makers and things like that. But I’m really interested in the more experimental, and situated, and how that decision making intersects with place, and time, and relationships, and power. Things like that. So that’s the question that I’m mulling over right now.

**KL:** Well I’m very excited to see this forthcoming with your work, and I want to think you so much for taking the time to come on the show and talk a little bit about autoethnography. Thanks, Anne-Marie!

**AMD:** Thank you!

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for joining us on this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode!

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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