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Kilian McCurrie
Louisiana State University

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Spiritual Identities, Teacher Identities, and the Teaching of Writing

Cover Page Footnote

Until August 2003 Kilian McCurrie had been an assistant professor of English Education at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. He taught courses in the teaching of writing and critical issues in English Education. Currently, he is a member of the English department at Columbia College in Chicago where he teaches a variety of writing courses.

Spiritual Identities, Teacher Identities, and the Teaching of Writing

Kilian McCurrie

In *The Secularization of the Academy* George Marsden chronicles the intellectual, religious, and educational developments that he believes led to the secularization of American universities. While Marsden and others have persuasively shown that our institutions became increasingly world centered as administrators and scholars pursued the aims and goals of the Enlightenment, this scholarship still remains blind to the influence of religion on teaching and learning, and, in a broader sense, the relationship between spirituality and pedagogy. Regardless of increasing secularization, universities remain infused with spirituality. Spirituality is the ancient search for meaning and connection to the sources of life, and, while institutions like church or university may express or connect people to the spirit, only people can be spiritual. Whether this search has led an individual to the lab, the pew, the psychiatrist's couch, or "all the above," our identities as spiritual beings influence our teaching.

My own identity as both a religious brother and teacher at a large state research institution, has given me the opportunity to ask myself questions about the alchemy of my own spiritual identity and the context of my work. This is not a question that only I have asked; my brothers in community also want to know how I can carry out my teaching ministry at any institution that is not Catholic.¹ Shouldn't finding work at a Catholic institution have been my number one priority on the job market? After all, wasn't Chaucer correct in observing that a monk out of his monastery is like a fish out of water? Of course, this opinion is based on the assumption that only a school with a religious mission can support the spiritual lives of teachers and students, and that ministry for the church can only occur within narrowly defined institutional parameters. The question of institutional identity does, however, have me struggling to figure out how visible a spiritual

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¹ I am a member of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious community for men founded in Ireland in 1801 by Edmund Rice. As brothers in the Catholic Church, the focus of our lives is the living out of our vows (poverty, chastity, and obedience) and our ministry of education. Although we traditionally live and work alongside other brothers in institutions that we own, often a brother's gifts will lead to work in a variety of contexts. My work at Louisiana State University, for example, has given me the opportunity to do important work in a variety of contexts, but unfortunately I must live outside the community since we do not have established residences in Louisiana.

identity can or should be and how or to what extent the institution contextualizes the relationship between spiritual identity and the teaching of writing.

When I look around me at the state university where I teach, I am struck by the recent phenomenon of student athletes gathering for prayer in the end zone after a football game or the sight of the little white crosses students carefully placed on the marching field at our school to remember the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. I have asked myself why these sights make me restless and anxious. Do they highlight my own lack of visibility or witness? At least part of the answer to this question may lie in the differences between my own religious and spiritual tradition and the way students choose to express their religion and spirituality, but these feelings of discomfort also prompt deeper questions in me about the connection between my own spiritual identity and the ministry of teaching. Too often, it seems, this tension gets presented to me as a kind of dualism: Are you a monk who teaches composition or a composition teacher who happens to be a monk? Many writing teachers may find themselves trying to escape similar binaries that set in opposition a teaching identity and a spiritual identity, or perhaps more commonly, teachers are simply unaware of this tension. Since spiritual identity can influence the assumptions we make about our role as teacher, the relationships we establish with students, and the overall purposes for writing, it is important to understand the workings of the spirit. By reflecting on the intersections of teaching identity, spiritual identity, and the contexts of our work, writing teachers can re-see the agencies of teacher and student as well as the knowledge they produce.

Spiritual Attachments in the Teaching of Writing

In the space of my own classroom, I believe my identities as religious brother and teacher do productively fuse to create a pedagogy which serves the needs of my students, but it is not a pedagogy rooted solely in the scientism foundational to the university or articulations of Christianity that tend to create binaries between spirit and flesh or salvation and damnation. Too often these unexamined spiritual attitudes produce controlling metaphors in writing pedagogies that inscribe students as inherently deficient. Even critical pedagogy, which claims to save students by empowering them to read ideological codes, must cast student writers as blind, waiting to be shown how to see clearly. Bruce McComiskey's *Teaching Composition as a Social Process* makes clear the ways this pedagogy replays the sin/redemption metaphor. According to McComiskey, typical articulations of critical teaching often use a cultural studies model that requires students to apply a theorist's interpretive model to their own experience. This "model-the-author" approach – similar to Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading* – often ignores notions of the social grounded in writing theory and instead measures the faulty student writer against the enlightened cultural theorist model. Even curricula that use social context as a point of departure for the critical teaching of writing too often emphasize mastery of the relevant debate over student writing. While critical teaching approaches from Berlin to Freire have advocated student writing that intervenes in power relations, students may often see these acts of intervention as just another part of an academic initiation that promises to make them acceptable to the university. Other students experience the writing defined by critical teachers as little more than an academic game played for a grade. In either

case, McComiskey argues that students are not given the opportunity to experience writing as part of an authentic social process. This line of argument reveals that often “critical” pedagogy takes on the status of “objective” when teachers or students perceive it as grounded in a more rooted sense of being on the “right” side. This unacknowledged attachment to the “right side” is aligned with a spiritual orientation that places the teacher in the role of seer/prophet and students in the role of initiate or, worse yet, backslider.

In *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*, David Wallace and Helen Rothchild Ewald attempt to respond to these criticisms of critical pedagogy by bridging the gap critical pedagogy often ignores between the intended curriculum and the experienced curriculum. Wallace and Ewald focus on reviving the dynamics of the classroom itself to support a mutuality of knowledge-making among all members within a class: “Teachers and students share the potential to adopt a range of subject positions and to establish reciprocal discourse relations as they negotiate meaning in the classroom” (3). This theory offers both personal and social transformation through dialogic interaction in the writing classroom. By focusing on the creative moment of interaction with student writers, Wallace and Ewald do not assume assimilation or resistance to the status quo as a predetermined objective. They relinquish the drive to convert students so that they can be more open to the moment of interaction with them. They argue that this change in teacher disposition creates a classroom dynamic that promotes the integration and transformation of personal experience/knowledge and the teacher’s representations of disciplinary knowledge. They conclude that without students’ willingness to integrate their knowledge and experience with the teacher’s disciplinary representations of knowledge, there can be no internally persuasive authority or transformation (5).

Pedagogy must be focused on teaching students to use language effectively to create knowledge, meaning, and community, but teachers must consider how these creations differ from the knowledge, meaning, and community that surround students. Valuing students’ knowledge and experience requires teachers to venture into the frontiers where the self begins to fray and the subjective and objective flow into each other. Pedagogy at these frontiers requires a spiritual orientation not based on the sinner/saved binary but on the connectivity between students, teachers, and the knowledge they produce.

Reflecting the Spirit in the Teaching of Writing

The spirituality of teaching flows from the present but unseen connections among students, teachers, and knowledge, but this insight can only benefit writing teachers if they are willing to articulate and reflect on the nature of these connections. Reflection is a term that finds its way into many attempts to enhance teacher’s professional development, but as Kathleen Blake Yancey has pointed out in *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, without a more comprehensive understanding of reflection, it can often be reduced to a kind of facile or idiosyncratic activity (20). From a spiritual perspective, reflection is much more involved than merely thinking about something. The history of meditation and contemplation in the Christian tradition demonstrates that reflection is both a retreating, a turning back, and a future oriented practice that requires both action and waiting. The practice of communal reading during meals in monasteries and convents, for example, evokes the active image of chewing food and “chewing”

the reading, but it also suggests a more passive waiting, holding, savoring, and finally ingesting. The meditation practiced by religious was aimed not only at an aesthetic appreciation of the reading, but also at an intertextual understanding of the reading's implications for the present and the blessed future. The technology of writing extended this practice since it enabled the production of artifacts detailing this inner conversation, and while the specter of supervision in religious communities is often evident in these writings, many like Theresa of Lisieux used this writing as a way to question, understand, and celebrate her life. When reflective practice is thought about in these terms and not mistaken for simply the thinking through or thinking over of something, it demonstrates how writing may bring sustained attention to the vivid flux of our spiritual and teaching identities.

By reflecting on the metaphors of brothering and community, I have tried to articulate and shape my own pedagogy. The process of creating meaning in a religious community is also not solitary or closed, but rather evolutionary, continually enfolding new experiences. In *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, theologian Matthew Fox brings together the images and words of the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen to demonstrate the connection between early Christian cosmology and the formation of community. Hildegard attributes the evolutionary process of making meaning in community to the Word itself which is "living, being spirit, all greening, all creativity" (qtd. in Fox 32). This Word manifests itself in each member of the community, indeed, "in every creature" (32). Making meaning in a religious community cannot, therefore, simply rehearse a purifying dialect that demands displacement or substitution. By recognizing the Word present in each person and in creation, the communal process is collaborative, promoting growth and transformation. Writing, in this view, is an inward and an outward journey, committed to re-presenting the explosive unity that emerges from the centripetal and centrifugal forces at work in community. While our language does both conceal and distort as it reveals, writing and truth are not opposed but dialectical. Key to the pursuit of this inward and outward journey is the community, joined together to promote social/human growth through building trust and allowing risk.

Just as Wallace and Ewald create a mutuality in the classroom, one that precludes *a priori* assumptions of student deficiency, my own spiritual and communal understandings do not foreground the deficiency of students but the ample sufficiency present in each individual and the community. Drawing on the resources of creation spirituality, I rely on Fox's notion of "original blessing" to energize a dynamic between individual writers and their communities. Fox's theology acknowledges that we enter a broken and torn world, but we do not enter as blotches or defects. We are each original blessings (*original* 47). Just as this insight transforms the life and goals of community, it also suggests how my identity as brother could enhance more mutual relationships in the writing classroom. In this view, brothering becomes a way to escape one of the most troubling aspects of teaching: the impulse to reproduce ourselves in our students. The sibling metaphor of brother or sister expresses the mutual relationship we share with nature and the word. Substituting the procreative metaphor for the sibling metaphor expresses each individual's connection to the source of blessing. Understanding the metaphors of brother and community has been a powerful way for me to nurture the spiritual center of teaching and promote greater mutuality and growth in the classroom.

Pedagogy that flows from this spirituality concerns itself with a different kind of power: not the power of control or the power of being over or being under or the power of self-replication but the power of fertility itself. By rereading scripture and tradition, creation spirituality moves away from the preoccupation with personal salvation and instead focuses on the salvation and healing of the people of God and the cosmos. This vision of both connecting and believing can transform writing, responding, and revising. A pedagogy rooted in this spiritual tradition seeks to transform the social sphere by celebrating not just the benefits of personal contemplation, but also contemplation's relationship to the work of peace and justice. In a pedagogy centered on creation spirituality, time is not focused on either a lost past perfection or an unrealizable future perfection, but on the amplitude and fullness of possibility the present offers. In a larger aesthetic sense, this focus on transforming the ordinary in accord with our dreams and desires for a better world also reflects the spiritual impulse to enrich life as a whole.

Creation Spirituality in the Writing Classroom

In my own writing classroom I have tried to promote literate habits that reflect these beliefs. Developing students' ability to both create and understand textual effects requires teaching practices that value the connectivity between teachers and students, allowing multiple ways of speaking and listening. Logs, dialogue journals, webboards, workshops, small group work, or simple turn-taking can all emphasize the knowledge-making possibilities in community and enhance students' awareness of the conditions of their own reading and writing. Even making silence in our classrooms can be a powerful tool in bringing about and deepening the connection between writers and the mores of our world. Since a pedagogy rooted in creation spirituality must relinquish the always-already of a prescribed pedagogy or curriculum, the design of the course itself must also allow for an ongoing negotiation in which students help to define what genres they will write in, how disciplinary knowledge will relate to students' knowledge, how this knowledge will be represented, and what roles and identities are available.

In a case study I conducted in a learning community section of first-year composition (FYC), I came to see the significance of a teacher's spiritual orientation in the overall ecology of his or her classroom. The learning community program at Midwestern State University (a pseudonym) was a voluntary program that placed first-year students together in groups of 25 for three general education courses and a weekly learning community seminar. In the spring of 2000, I investigated the experiences of one learning community that I participated in as the FYC teacher. My data collection was initially designed to help me answer questions about students' writing in the general education curriculum. Through weekly log entries, the students in the learning community recorded the ways they used writing in core classes designed to promote critical thinking. What I found most surprising as I read students' logs, however, was not the ways they used writing in their core classes or the methods of their teachers, but the much broader influence a teacher's spiritual identity had on the development of student voice. Nick, for example, one of a group of males that occupied the back of class, thought of himself as something of the class clown. On the first day of class, he shared from his writing activity that "hey, I ain't first class, but I ain't white trash neither." The class laughed, seeming to expect this from Nick, but I found

his self-parody hid a far more reflective student, so while he enjoyed effecting the carefree/careless working class white student, his log revealed more. In the short writing activity that day, he shared the joke, but the rest of the entry shows someone else:

I guess I know I'm a writer because at home I'm surrounded by people who just can't period, or read for that matter. The fact that somebody asked me to finish the sentence "I know am a writer because . . ." makes me think that maybe I will be a writer?

What became more obvious to me as I read logs like Nick's was that my initial focus on writing in the core curriculum ignored the space that individual teachers created with students and how this could influence how they saw themselves in relation to each other, the teacher, and knowledge. In the first log entry, I had asked students to finish the statement "I know I am a writer because. . . ." I have used this prompt as a way to help students begin to think about their identity as a writer, but I found that it also revealed to students something about me: I wanted to believe in them. Even if most students simply wrote about their positive or negative experiences of writing in high school, they would have the opportunity to complicate that understanding as the course progressed. By foregrounding in writing prompts the sufficiency as opposed to deficiency of students, teachers initiate a practice that reflects a deeper spiritual conviction about blessing and the connectivity of the classroom. Many teachers design practices that reflect a similar spiritual center, but, through a greater awareness of the relationship between spirituality and pedagogy, teachers can also persevere in the face of struggles.

A pedagogy based on original blessing does present many challenges, among them are those students who do not want to share authority or risk staking a claim for themselves in their own learning. This resistance is not the same, however, as that offered to critical teaching, which often characterizes resistance as a lack of critical consciousness. By beginning with students' own motivations, spiritual pedagogy uses the community of the classroom to bridge the individual and personal with the communal and social. Often this transformation of the personal and communal entails helping students re-see issues, not necessarily more clearly, but differently. This vision and voice are the grace that community offers: words that breathe, create, and transform. The critical consciousness Freire had as his goal was dependent on just such a notion of community, but we have struggled to articulate this part of Freire's work in our own classrooms. Freire does not simply offer teachers of writing a method or writing programs a curriculum or mission. He offers an overall disposition towards the human beings we teach: love that is tough, tender, and courageous.

Through his reading, writing, and interacting with others in the FYC course, Nick had been offered alternate ways to see his own identity, but he found it difficult to perform as anything other than the "class clown," someone on the margins of the class and the university. His struggle was not simply in *knowing better* (critical consciousness) – he shows in his first journal entry a desire to be something other than the class clown. The tough part, the part that requires a teacher's spiritual resolve, is helping a student like Nick *do better*. An awareness of the spiritual dimensions of teaching can sustain hope-filled, optimistic teachers and help them move past the disappointments that drive teachers away from the profession.

One of Nick's most revealing journal entries was part of his description of a revision activity in which students were asked to take a graded essay from another class and revise it. The Writing Program required this assignment as a way to help students connect learning experiences across classes. Nick's entry expresses his resistance, but it also demonstrates that the dis-connect he experiences transcends course content and reveals his sense of being personally and communally objectified:

Why would I want to look at my Political Science paper again? I did what Dr. X wanted. He doesn't want to look at those papers again. How can I revise it? What's the point? These classes are just totally different. . . You know are names by the third class like some high school teacher, and Dr. X spends fifteen minutes of every class calling our names. We say "here." How are we suppose to write a paper for a guy like this and then revise it for your class? . . . Nothing like having to say "here". . . The same people every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. He's a philosopher, I guess. I only hope I can find the paper.

Nick's experiences mirror other students in their reluctance to engage with this revision project. For Nick, his resistance and pessimism are in part due to his precarious status in FYC. As a student who had at this point in the course yet to do one revision of a draft, Nick might perceive this revision project might appear to be a waste of time. Compound this with his belief that only FYC teachers actually care enough about revision to consider it, and it becomes clear that Nick will have a hard time gleaning anything from this revision experience. Nick not only resists the prospect of revising a paper from another class in our FYC class, but he also suggests that the revision assignment fails to account for the apparently very different ways he views his teachers. Nick contrasts my "high school teacher" habit of learning students' names with his political science teacher's apparent inability to learn names and reliance on the ritual of calling roll. For Nick, the working class student, the ritual of calling roll seems to reinforce his feelings of being an outsider, while my ability to call students by their names seems too reminiscent of high school. In the end, Nick suggests that the main difference between his teachers is the fact that his political science teacher is a philosopher, which may be his way of accounting for the different ways knowledge is made and valued in his political science class and FYC class.

Nick observed that the political science teacher, a "philosopher," wanted students to write arguments on some relevant current event "packed with claims and warrants" but to ignore other rhetorical concerns like purpose and audience. This a-rhetorical approach left students feeling that the purpose of this writing was simply to display a competency. Writing and teaching satisfied by these kinds of displays of competency flow from the spirituality of deficiency: the assumption that students lack intellectually and socially, which deficiencies the curriculum and teaching should correct. By listening to students, I found that many feared writing about the beliefs and values that form the criterion for argument because they were first and foremost unsure of what they believed, but even more importantly, students feared sharing beliefs because they expected the teacher to deconstruct them or, as one student put it, "mess with" them. In other words, writing about something they had little interest or stake in was a move to ensure

“self” preservation. In *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* Jasper Neel argues that this kind of vapid writing is exactly what students produce when they are writing in a Platonic system in which “truth” in writing is an impossibility. I view this disconnect as the consequence of a spirituality of deficiency that separates the knower from the known, teacher from student, and believing from doubting. A spirituality rooted in creation would not atomize these oppositions but fuse them, creating and re-creating our perceptions about teaching and learning. The political science teacher’s writing assignment reflected the programmatic requirement that students demonstrate the ability to use claims and evidence when writing an argument. While claims and evidence are important in argumentation, the argument itself can only become important for students when it is seen as a complex rhetorical act. General education curricula can often present argument as a Platonic method for writing others “off,” instead of a spiritual way of writing others and ourselves “in.” Defined in this way, the argument practiced in our classrooms becomes a place to negotiate the inward and outward search for meaning as well as the consequences that meaning may have for action in the world. Teachers’ spiritual identity has consequences, then, not just for their own classrooms, but for the programs and institutions within which they work.

Nick’s log entry after a workshop on this revision demonstrates his ability to re-see argument and his stake in his writing when a class flows from a creation-centered spirituality:

In workshop Kate said I could write a revision about gun safety. Brian told me my value sucked, but I was joking about that. I wrote this to argue for the freedom to own guns. I got a B-. When you asked us to think about a value I wrote I liked guns. I’m like Elmer Fudd or something. Brian and Kate got me thinking maybe I just want to be able to hunt. I don’t have to write this paper defending every Rambo who wants a gun. I could write a paper about some of things people do to try to keep safe, and some of the stupid things I see guys do.

Nick did write a revision of the original argument from political science that reflected the way his workshop group was able to help him think about a more authentic purpose and audience. His revised argument reflected Brian and Kate’s ability to see beyond Nick’s public persona, to believe he could write a different argument, based on his values, beliefs, and experiences. While someone telling you that your value “sucks” may not sound profoundly spiritual, I think this log entry does demonstrate that our connectivity to others is vital in our attempts to revise. Nick’s encounter in this response group helped him foreground his experience and enthusiasm for hunting as he addressed other students and informed them about the ways they can promote safety and responsibility. Both Kate and Brian showed that Nick could re-see his rather formulaic argument by considering his underlying values and personal experience.

Nick’s account of this workshop is not unusual. Writing teachers and students are a part of these types of encounters everyday, but what this log does is highlight a slice of what it means to come to know through a deeper understanding of our inward and outward journey. Even in the great strides Friereian theorists/teachers have made in creating classrooms more open to the pressing social concerns of the world, they have often created critical pedagogies that ignore the relationships

they create in their own classrooms. In their efforts to promote the critical and rational habits necessary to a democracy, some teachers have left unexamined the ways the bonds they forge give students the confidence and trust to risk caring about things beyond their immediate world. The seeming banality of a log entry like Nick's might make some teachers cringe, and its lack of drama left me wondering how I would forge the narrative elements so necessary to effective qualitative research. In the end, however, I came to realize that these scenes demonstrate the powerful relationship between our deepest attachments and beliefs and the spaces we create for students.

Many students recorded in their logs how important it is to feel connected to other students and how this connectivity affected them as writers and learners. Often students digressed in their log entries, beginning with descriptions of their own writing and then commenting on the effects their relationships in the learning community were having, especially on their collaborative projects. Because this learning community had only five males, however, one of the male students, Haranu, a student from Africa, found himself in a group of female students who wanted to work in local women's shelter for victims of domestic violence. Haranu records his reaction in his log:

I do like Maren, Erica, and Sue, but I think I should have been allowed to join the group with the other men. Would one group of five be a problem? I didn't ask in class because I did not want the women to think I did not want to be in their group. I do not understand why they want to work in the shelter and write on such a topic. This the kind of talking and sharing I am against. Don't they feel shame? I was embarrassed to listen. We don't talk about such things although they are very evil and wrong. The other men are doing their project with coaching soccer. I could really contribute to this group. I may still ask to switch groups.

Both his gender and cultural location made this group project a challenge for Haranu. Surprisingly, none of the other group members mentioned anything about Haranu's discomfort, and he never expressed his desire to switch groups to me. While Haranu expressed his resistance in this entry, his relationships with his classmates seemed to stall his attempt to switch groups. Haranu's work in this group shows students' ability to stretch outside their own foundations of self and knowing when they are able to connect to one another. Several weeks after his first entry on the collaborative project, Haranu writes in his log about some of the research the group has done and reveals a significant insight:

This collaboration is very time consuming. We have not done this much for our other classes . . . Each group member is researching some area. I said nothing, just hoping to get through it. Maybe they wouldn't notice that I wasn't really interested or understanding. Yesterday we went to something called clothesline project. The women were very moved listening and reading stories written on blood spattered clothes of women who were beaten. I do not react as they do, maybe I come from a violent place? But when we were leaving the group thanked me for coming with them. This felt strange. I could not imagine why after all our time together in the

learning community and our classes. I felt different yesterday, for the first time like I wanted to understand. And I definitely want our project to be good. . .

As I tried to make sense of this log entry, I was initially disturbed by the silence that Haranu had imposed on himself. While Haranu's doubt and resistance to this project could have been incorporated in valuable ways that could have made their writing more compelling, the generosity group members demonstrate is in itself quite compelling. Haranu's connection to his group members and their generosity ultimately creates a space for him to reconsider his position and re-see the issue from their point of view. No one in the group was questioning or skeptical of including Haranu in the collaborative project, and Haranu's moment of grace seems based on three women in his group thanking him. "For what?" he wrote. In their own way the group had moved beyond mere tolerance, seeing Haranu in the best, most optimistic way, and Haranu is motivated to ask himself if he can, in fact, live up to their image of him and really see the issue as they do. Community and the sense of self it promotes enabled Haranu to do the rhetorical work of positioning and re-positioning himself in light of his new experiences. Haranu's silence represented, not just his resistance, but also his generous attempt to listen and defer making final judgments.

Spirituality in the Thick of Things

Ignatius Loyola, the sixteenth century founder of the Society of Jesus, encouraged his followers to be contemplatives in action. This was his way of trying to make sense of our often contradictory longings and desires for both solitude and community. Teachers must also find ways to manage the overlapping of their spirituality, their pedagogy, and their institutional context. Whether we work in a secular or religious institution, whether our spiritual identity derives from a religious tradition or the psychologist's office, developing a more comprehensive understanding of these connections can help teachers re-see their own practice. A pedagogy rooted in Fox's idea of original blessing does not need a particular religion to be effective. It does, however, require a renewed spirituality. The damaging tendency of any institution, religious or secular, is to assume it must lead people to some predetermined place instead of accompany them on their journey. Teaching has too often made this mistake as well, but through the metaphors we create for connecting with and accompanying students on their journey, writing teachers can revitalize the life-giving mission of the university. ☞

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