

Self-Evaluation Document

Mary E. Hess / Luther Seminary / January 2019

I am conscious, as I begin this self-evaluation, that it spans the time period from 2013 – 2018. These five years at Luther have been very challenging, and full of tumultuous change. In 2013 I wrote a detailed promotion portfolio, for the summative review which led to my promotion to full professor. In looking back over that portfolio, I am struck by how many of the responsibilities I had then – particularly for teaching a range of courses required in educational leadership – have since disappeared. In their place has come a new curriculum – already revised through two versions – and a wholly different structure for advising students.

The world outside of Luther has been changing dramatically as well. Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012. Michael Brown and Eric Garner were killed in 2014. Philando Castile was killed in 2016. The list of people (particularly persons from minoritized communities) who have died in extra judicial killings has become too long to recite in this short space. Starting in the spring of 2013 I found myself drawn into a variety of protests, vigils, and church forums catalyzed by the Black Lives Matter movement. My sabbatical proposal, originally written in the fall of 2014, and later revised when my sabbatical was postponed, had little in it of response to these issues and was focused primarily on CML and global media, as well as digital storytelling. Yet the Holy Spirit continues to breathe into my life and the world around me.

Thus my sabbatical during the academic year of 2015-2016 saw me drawn ever more deeply into research and writing focused on dismantling racism. The fruit of that year blossomed in a number of pieces in peer-reviewed journals and books, as well as ongoing work with local community and church organizations. Then in the 2016-2017 year I had the great joy and privilege of serving as the Patrick and Barbara Keenan Visiting Chair in Religious Education on the Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto. That year in a wholly different academic and cultural context was thoroughly energizing, and it revitalized my sense of myself as a theological educator. I am deeply grateful to Luther for granting me that leave, and to St. Mike's for so completely welcoming me.

Research

Here is how I currently describe my research:

Hess has degrees from Yale, Harvard and Boston College, and has directed a number of projects focusing on the challenges of media culture for communities of faith. As an educator straddling the fields of media studies and religious studies, Hess has focused her research on exploring ways in which participatory strategies for knowing and learning are constructed and contested amidst digital cultures. She is particularly interested in dialogic forms of organizational development, and the challenges posed to communities by oppressive systems such as racism, classism, sexism, and so on.

Perhaps you can see in that description that I have not left behind my concerns with digital media, but my work has become ever more closely focused on the epistemological challenges emerging in these spaces, and particularly the ways in which our relationships are shaped and formed – in many cases de-formed – by the ways in which we understand what it means “to know.”

At the moment I am deep into the writing of a manuscript I share with Stephen Brookfield, which is under contract by Stylus Publications. Tentatively entitled “Creating a white anti-racist identity: Practical hope for racial change,” this book is our shared effort to help white educators engage racialization in the US in pragmatic, grounded, and transformative ways.

I am also still seeking a publisher for a book-length monograph I wrote while in Toronto – “Create, share, believe: Storying faith in a post-church world.” That project is perhaps not a good fit for any existing publisher, and I am currently pondering turning it into an e-book and simply releasing it in that format.

Teaching

Although I enjoy research and writing, I am convinced that the heart of my vocation at Luther is found in my teaching. No matter the frustrations to be found at Luther our mission – “educating leaders for Christian communities” —remains joy-filled and life-giving for me. I am deeply engaged with the Christian Public Leader team and course sequence, with CPL2 – “Who is my neighbor?” – the course I teach most often.

At this point I teach that course every spring, and last summer taught a version of it as well (as I will again this summer). As a signature course which is required of all of our first degree masters’ level students – this spring I have 91 students registered in that class – this course sits at a crucial intersecting point between the more classical disciplines we teach at Luther, and the widely varying contexts in which our students learn. It is also in a course sequence – the two terms of CPL (for MDIV students) and four terms of CPL (for professional MA students) – which is the only structural spiritual formation required in our curriculum. I am the first person to note that spiritual formation occurs throughout our curriculum – and indeed in tacit ways throughout a student’s entire journey – but it is in the CPL courses that students are intentionally required to attend to their spiritual formation.

I also have been teaching the capstone course in the professional MA degrees – LD530. This is the course in which our CYF, CML, CLIM, CCC, and CM students (an alphabet grab bag of retiring and emerging degrees) write their capstone project papers, and create professional portfolios. While it is profoundly challenging to be teaching CPL2 and LD530 at the same time (they both must occur in the spring semester), my commitment to students remains at the heart of my vocation, and thus these courses do as well.

This spring I have also added GR8530 (the doctoral level seminar focused on teaching) to the mix. It remains to be seen how well I will handle all three courses at once, but I am excited by the challenge and look forward to seeing how they all unfold.

Beyond these required courses, I try to teach at least two electives each year. These tend to rotate between courses focused on digital media, courses focused on environmental pedagogies, on interfaith learning, and the course I teach with Vivian Jenkins-Nelsen on dismantling racism. That latter course feels even more pressing and pertinent to me now, than when we first created it back in 2006. In future I very much want to develop and teach a course on nonviolence – nonviolent communication, nonviolent civil resistance, and the theological frameworks which undergird those practices.

Beyond the teaching I do at Luther, I must mention the courses I teach in other venues. Trinity Lutheran Seminary (now a part of Capital University) continues to require a course in educational ministry for their MDiv students. As one of the few (if the only?) remaining full-time professors of Christian Ed in the ELCA seminary context, I teach a week-long intensive version of that course for them. Last summer I had a Luther DL student come to take the course as well, and I have some hope that perhaps there might be ways to continue to collaborate between Luther and Trinity.

Finally, in an effort to keep my grounding in Roman Catholic settings, I usually teach an intensive course every summer in the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University (a Jesuit campus). I have used that space as a playground for trying out new courses. A course I teach there – “Women mystics and adaptive action” – is one I would like to bring to Luther, as I think it would have new relevance here.

Community service

Over the past five years I have been involved in a number of forms of community service, both here and beyond campus (detailed in full on my CV). Of particular note, In 2014-2015 I served as chair of the Leadership Division (a service for which I postponed my granted sabbatical). Since coming back from my stint in Toronto, I have served on the Campus Vision planning committee, the PhD admissions committee, and the library director search committee. I am chairing the CCC search committee, and I am also the faculty rep to the Student Council.

Beyond Luther I continue to serve as a consultant for the Wabash Center (the various consultations I’ve led in that role are detailed on my CV). I also am a member of the Faculty Development Advisory Committee of the Association of Theological Schools, and until January was a member of the National Advisory Council of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men. I regularly offer workshops and presentations in various theological settings, most recently for the ATS workshop for mid-career faculty, and the FTE/YTI group. Finally, I remain the networking coordinator of the Religious Education Association (my academic guild).

Beyond the academy I serve on the board of the nonprofit Shalom Hill Farm, and recently left the board of the Loyola Spirituality Center. I continue to offer adult ed presentations at a variety of local churches (most recently at Westminster Presbyterian and Easter Lutheran). My worshipping community is found at the University of St. Catherine, and I participate in the St. Brigid Family Faith Formation process.

You can find more details about all of the above at my professional website (including password-protected access to my published writing): meh.religioused.org