

My Teaching Philosophy  
Eric Gary Anderson

I taught my first college class at the age of 22. When I called the roll for the first time, my hands were shaking; my first decision as a classroom teacher was to put the roster down on the table and brace my hands so that I could (I thought at the time) seem less nervous. Ever since that shaky beginning in September 1982, I've been completely absorbed in the extraordinary complexity of pretty much everything that goes into teaching, from the planning to the postmortems that my wife tolerates even though she thinks, rightly, that they're too long and critical. I especially love the surprises, the kindnesses, the generosity, the brilliance, and the hope that my students bring to every classroom and office hour.

*"There are some things I have to tell you," the Navajo medicine man Betonie says to the reluctant mixed-blood hero Tayo in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel Ceremony. As he helps Tayo recover from a debilitating case of post-traumatic stress disorder, Betonie goes on to explain that "after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong" (116). Only this growth will heal Tayo; only this growth will reconnect him to his home culture at Laguna Pueblo; only this growth will keep Laguna and Native America healthy; and, as if all this is not enough, only this growth will nudge a profoundly scarred post-World War Two world toward healing. All the still-wobbly Tayo has to do is step in to a ceremony that has been happening all around him for a very long time, make the right changes to it at the right times, and save the world.*

I am not the Navajo medicine man of undergraduate and graduate education at George Mason University. The course objectives I list on my syllabi have never included the phrase "save the world." But when I read *Ceremony* for the first time, and then taught it for the first time when my own first reading was still fresh, I began to make real changes in my own teaching rituals. Betonie gave me some good ideas. First, he presents himself as a medicine man who does not quite meet Tayo's prior expectations of how medicine men are supposed to operate. (Tayo just barely resists the impulse to turn tail. My students usually stay with me, as I'm decidedly not scary, but I'm also a bit of a novelty to them at first: a professor less interested in his own professorial authority than in, say, working with them to co-create a classroom that, from the start, encourages and values collaboration.) Then, Betonie explains that "things which don't shift and grow are dead things." Then he presents Tayo with a challenging assignment that he *can* successfully complete—provided that he embraces the work at hand as an unpredictable process involving both reason and intuition, both prior knowledge and raw, open exploration. That all sounds a lot like what happened to me as a teacher after I, too, began to learn how to shift and grow in my own classrooms, and how to invite my students to shift and grow with me.

When I taught *Ceremony* for the first time, I taught it not in a Native American Literature class but in first-year Honors composition. Twenty-three undergraduates, none of them American Indian and most from New Jersey, met with me, another non-Native American from New Jersey, to wrap our minds around this Native novel whose implications are global but whose physical setting is Laguna Pueblo, not far from Albuquerque, New Mexico. While sometimes it's true that students don't know what they don't know, my students and I were never in any doubt as to what we didn't know about Laguna Pueblo culture. And that gave us all a great, shared place to begin.

I should explain that, pre-*Ceremony*, I looked to my own professors as pedagogical examples. Nearly every single one of my teachers at Rutgers was a formidable, internationally-recognized authority in his (and, more rarely, her) field; nearly all of them did nearly all of the talking in the classes I taught. That was, and still is, a powerful model for me. I'd tried it, to not particularly good effect, in my own classrooms during my first few years of teaching. But I did not let go of that model completely until *Ceremony* changed my world and I saw and felt in it the potential to change my students' worlds, too. How could I possibly teach *Ceremony*—and, for that matter, writing—while

also trying to play sage-on-the-stage? How could I possibly give my students the opportunity to make their own changes in their own rituals if I were at the same time dedicating the majority of our class time to one person's experience of the book: mine?

*Ceremony*, more than any other person or thing, taught me how to teach. It taught me the value of sitting down with my students and talking together about our shared experiences of challenging texts and challenging tasks. It gave me a main character, Tayo, who has to learn how to read and interpret his world by stepping into a story that is already happening all around him and by figuring out how to contribute to that story. As I like to tell my students, *Ceremony* is an amazingly pedagogical book: it teaches us how to read it and, like a great teacher, it encourages us to participate in a world made of stories, a world with "no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (229).

When I first read and taught *Ceremony*, I was a graduate Teaching Assistant at Rutgers. The experiences I detail above opened a door that led me to write a Ph.D. dissertation on southwestern American literary borderlands in works by both Native and non-Native writers. When I transformed the dissertation into my first book, *American Indian Literature and the Southwest* (1999), I opened the Acknowledgments section by announcing that "This book began as a freshman writing course in central New Jersey." I'm still proud of that. I came to understand that the American Southwest mattered to students on the other side of the continent and that Laguna Pueblo mattered to white students who had only visited it by virtue of reading a novel. In talking with my students about the possibility of building bridges across regions and cultures, I discovered my own writing project.

In my first tenure-track job, at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, I taught all matter of American and Native American literature classes, undergraduate and graduate, as well as the Introduction to Literature and Advanced Composition and Rhetoric classes. There I learned versatility, in the sense that I could teach a wide range of classes across many different literary-historical periods, genres, and cultures. My Oklahoma students saw me as a warm, enthusiastic teacher—a good model for aspiring teachers and, for Ph.D. students, a teacher who really could help them place their critical and creative work. Over the span of about eight years, several of my students published peer-reviewed articles and three published well-received books. I also made inroads in getting Native American Literature established as a Ph.D. exam subject area at OSU.

But eventually, the novelty of being a New Jersey boy in Oklahoma wore off. In 2004, I was thrilled to accompany my wife Shelley Reid to our new jobs here at George Mason University. Nearly ten years later, I'm still thrilled. Here's how; here's why.

### **Mason students**

I'm constitutionally suspicious of generalizations about students. Each group of students I've taught has been magnificently diverse; this is especially true at Mason, where the visible, audible, spirited diversity of our campus makes me feel at home every single day. But what I think I can say about Mason students is that they are amazingly socialized. For example, I noticed right away that most of my GMU students really take to in-class groupwork. They like to work together, and their willingness to hook up with a group (or a partner) allows me to try new things—like groupwork scaffolding, where I ask everyone to work solo and write in class, then partner up with someone and compare notes, then form small groups and determine the range of consensus and difference among group members, then go into supergroups (two small groups combined), or go up to the whiteboard and write group findings, or return to full-class discussion mode, or. . . . Thanks to my students' ease with collaborative work, I can ask them to do all of the above. Or I can try something new.

By and large, my Mason students have also proven themselves to be fearless, both in class and in their writing. Yes, some of my students here are every bit as quiet and introverted as I was as an undergraduate. (I tell my classes about that side of myself.) But I've never had better—more wide-ranging, more free-wheeling, more comprehensive, more searching, more questioning—in-class discussions than I've had here. In my Native American Literature and Introduction to Native American and Indigenous Studies classes, I announce on day one that I'm not an Indian, that there is much I don't know and much I can't know about Native cultures and Native ways of seeing and being. Far from claiming an authority I simply do not have and (to be honest) am not very interested in, I check the mantle of authority at the door. After doing so, I'm still the person who has read the most, written the most, and thought the most about the course material; but I'm also the teacher who talks *with* his students about the material, explores it *with* them, willingly says "I don't know" as often as necessary, and, along the way, approaches the readings and discussions with both respect and bouncy enthusiasm. It's hard for me to pinpoint exactly what creates the classroom atmospherics that make for really good class discussions. But the broad-stroke assumptions and approaches I describe here seem to help encourage students to join in this collaborative, multidirectional work, in which they learn from each other and me and I learn from them.

Sure, saying "I don't know" can feel risky. But the payoff is tremendous. The most fearless of my generally fearless students feel able to push back, challenge my interpretations of literary texts, move a discussion in a direction I didn't cue, and just generally do the kinds of things I'm hoping they'll do with a given discussion. As we explore a literary text or a question together, we collaboratively demystify the most complicated readings, making them seem much more possible and worthwhile; and we collaboratively mystify the readings that, at first blush, seem perfectly straightforward and easy.

All of this can, and does, happen a fair amount of the time, thanks to my Mason students.

### **Mason classes**

Since coming to Mason in 2004, I have taught classes ranging from English 201 to English 701. I've had the pleasure of working with at least a couple hundred General Education literature students over the past nine years; it's so much fun, and such a privilege, to be the teacher who gives GenEd students their first and only taste of university-level literature. My English 201 and 202 classes have been wonderfully raw and rough around the edges; these are the places where we get to have crucial conversations about what it means to read more critically and analytically and riskily than they've ever read before (and whether we're "reading too much into it" or not).

My GenEd literature classes have been the most hands-on classes I've taught; we all drew the Martians H.G. Wells describes in *The War of the Worlds*, for example, which demonstrated better than just about anything else that we all see and imagine and interpret literary texts differently. I also had my 201 students build a model of the hidey-hole/crawlspace Harriet Jacobs lived in for several years; in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she gives us such an exact description of this space that we're able to reconstruct it. Then I invited a student who's the same height as Jacobs (5'4") to stand next to our model, which showed us exactly how cramped that space was and gave us a sharper sense of how much Jacobs endured as an escaped slave in hiding.

One more example, because I can't resist: in my Vampires! 202 last spring, everyone created their own version of a vampire story. This project helped us think about how, and why, vampire legends and stories continue to evolve in particular ways at particular times. It was also ridiculously fun. My students wrote short stories, did animations (using the online site xtranormal), made videos (including one combining vampires and the local Bunny-man bridge legend), created a vampire baby book ("Vlad's first tooth"), and more. Everyone turned in an analytical-reflective

"introduction" to their project, so that I could evaluate their work on its critical as well as creative merits. And, during the final week of the semester, many of the students stood up in front of the entire 40-person class and shared their projects. (In one of them, I myself was a vampire college professor. . . .)

I've also taught various 300- and 400-level English courses, including Native American Literature, Faulkner and Southern Fictions, and our big six-credit required course for English majors and minors, Dimensions of Writing and Literature. Like the 200-level General Education classes, these upper-division classes are writing-intensive. I ask my students to see our class discussions as raw material for their essays (both the shorter ones and the longer ones) and their wiki posts. I also regularly try new things. For example, this fall in English 352, Native American Literature, we'll cap the semester with a translation project. As I explain on the syllabus, "Working on your own or with a partner, translate all or part of one of our course texts into a different medium. You can use any format or genre: film/video, live performance, visual art, comics/animation, graphic novel, song, oral performance, etc. Actually, you can do whatever you want as long as you are clearly translating one of the course texts into another format—as long as you remain true to the original text, no matter how radically you change things up." I'm asking everyone to make a topic proposal so that we can bounce ideas back and forth and so that my students, who have probably never done an assignment quite like this before, know that they're on the right path.

To hearken back to what I say above about the dangers of generalizations, I'll also mention here that I remain very accessible to students at all times but especially when they're working on writing assignments. I'm always happy to talk with them, face-to-face or over e-mail, about their work in progress. I also try to provide specific, substantive comments and suggestions about the content of their writing, the structure and persuasiveness of their arguments, the reasons why their essays and other pieces of writing were a pleasure to read, and the elements that could benefit from further work. In evaluating student writing, I weigh everything but concentrate on ideas. Interestingly, many of the questions my students have about their writing center on things like citation formats and the use of "I." These are important questions, I tell them, but my years of commenting on student essays and working with students on their writing have taught me that the most challenging thing to write is the introduction—and that the most challenging thing to do is often to convince a student that her ideas really are the most important thing.

Every semester, a number of students thank me for taking the time to make comments and suggestions on their written work. They were surprised by the comments, they tell me; many of their professors don't make comments, and so they don't necessarily expect their professors to care very much about their writing. This surprises me in turn. All I can say is that responding to student writing is an art form that, for me, is predicated not only on caring but also on assuming, always, that my students are trying things and trying their best.

Happily, I'm often able to teach Native American Literature or Intro to NAIS in the fall semester, so that the class coincides with Native American Heritage Month on campus. I serve as the faculty advisor for the GMU Native American and Indigenous Alliance, and I try to connect the student group and the class to each other as much as possible. This fall, my Native American Literature students went to the powwow, wrote wiki posts about their experience, and posted photographs of themselves at the event.

On the graduate level, I've taught literature classes as well as the English department's required research methods course. With graduate classes, my big challenge is to resist, or to tamp down, the temptation simply to walk into class, press "go," and moderate the discussion that will almost certainly ensue. Graduate students can and will carry a discussion for a long while. Much as I love discussions and see them as absolutely vital to our literary-analytical work, I make a big point of working to make sure that my graduate students don't get shortchanged in other important areas—such as groupwork and writing instruction. I've grown less and less comfortable simply asking my

graduate students to produce a researched critical essay, as if by magic and with no material assistance from me. Last week in my English 655 class, "American Hauntings," we dedicated the entire class to workshopping short drafts of possible topics for their upcoming paper. Each student brought in three short drafts, joined a writing group, provided written and oral comments on groupmates' drafts, and practiced searching library databases. In addition to making time and space for writing workshops at the graduate level, I also try to do at least some groupwork and/or partner work every week, and I try to vary the groupwork directions from week to week. In my experience, my graduate students appreciate, and profit from, talking with each other and learning from each other. And this learning reaches beyond the seminar classroom: one of my best-ever compliments came from an MA student and high-school teacher who told me that she loved all the various group activities we did in "Southern Fictions from Faulkner to *Swamplandia!*" and tried several of them in her own classes.

### Teaching Teachers

I also regularly teach English 610, our Proseminar in the Teaching of Literature. My section of 610 is restricted to Teaching Assistants, almost all of them MFA students, who are teaching English 201, one of our General Education literature courses, for the first time during the same semester that they take 610. Needless to say, this convergence makes for dynamic, pragmatic class meetings. In this class, I'm as much a mentor as I am a "traditional" classroom teacher. In fact, I meet and work with the TAs during the last several weeks of the semester prior to our 610/201 classes, as they figure out their 201 reading lists and cobble together their syllabi. Then, in our spring proseminar, we practice and troubleshoot various 201 classroom strategies, talk about how to write a good 201 writing prompt, and share stories and strategies.

I'm also incredibly grateful for the opportunity to serve as a mentor in the Department of English's carefully-designed junior faculty mentoring program. More broadly, it's so great to work with colleagues who love to talk about teaching. At other institutions, an alarming number of my colleagues taught behind closed doors and kept their pedagogies a guarded secret. At Mason, I've had fabulous teaching conversations in hallways, offices, coffee shops, and more.

### Mason Innovations

About six years ago, I played a leading role in building our interdisciplinary minor in Native American and Indigenous Studies. We brought undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, ODIME staff, and Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian staff together to figure out how best to organize, name, and promote this new program. I loved how our program-building work brought together such a diverse group of people with such an important shared interest. I love how the NAIS minor and the NAIA student group support, complement, and enrich each other. We teach each other; we learn together; we make a home place together.

*On the verge of completing a ceremony that never really ends, Tayo "cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (229). He learns by talking with others; he learns by doing, and especially by making changes in the rituals. He finds his way back to Laguna Pueblo, back to home, and he tells the people his story.*