By: Jillian Ives
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Jeremiah Pitts

Personal Story

When asked what he most wants students to walk away with from his class, Jeremiah Pitts said he wants his students to have "tools in the toolbox." An Associate Professor of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at Albany State University, Mr. Pitts wants to teach students to "think clearly" so that they can "write clearly." Being able to write clearly is "a useful skill in all of life," and he wants "them to be able to say what they were thinking and for the thoughts to be clear, and writing is the best way I know of to be able to do that."

One way Mr. Pitts helps students develop their toolbox is to teach them to use language in real-life scenarios, which is a technique called communicative language teaching. He works to create "scenarios that . . . produce the type of language" used in the real world so that students learn language in context "that mimics real life." He finds a real-life portrayal of language is much more effective than the traditional "memorization and repetition" because "performance is a key" to learning a new language.

Jeremiah Pitts engaged his students right before the fall break with one of these opportunities to use language in real-life scenarios. He assigned his students to read "a brief history" of Thanksgiving and then led the students in a class discussion on "what they would do this upcoming week for Thanksgiving." He then had them write a "reflection on what cultural items they have from their own countries that are similar or dissimilar to Thanksgiving." This is an approach he calls "layering," where he has students read, talk, and write about the same topic in English.

Learning it's okay to make mistakes, and how to work through them, is also part of Mr. Pitts' approach to help students develop tools in their toolbox. He creates a "collaborative" classroom environment by encouraging students to openly discuss "ways that we can improve." He is willing to put himself up as an example, and the students are "always very excited" when they can "catch" Mr. Pitts making a linguistic error in class.

In fact, learning from mistakes is not only something he wants his students to know how to do, but something he says influences his teaching the most. He learned various teaching techniques from trial and error, and observing colleagues' teaching to "see what works" for them. Although Mr. Pitts also admits that sometimes in teaching it "is the combination of your personal abilities and the students who are in the room and the subject matter all coming together into something that's productive. I think that's one of the most beautiful and maddening things about teaching is that it is a combination of things that are difficult to nail down."

Mr. Pitts gets the most enjoyment out of the times when students "come back" and tell him about how they used what he taught them in their lives beyond school. This "fulfillment on an individual-level" is what drew Mr. Pitts to teaching and away from his original career path in finance. He went back to school to get "a graduate degree in linguistics" and has been teaching at Albany State University since 2008. He teaches a variety of courses, including entry level grammar writing courses, mythology, and first year experience.

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Policy-Related Overview

In addition to his teaching, Mr. Pitts serves as the Director of Academic Support Services. In this role, he is responsible for coordinating aspects of the corequisite courses at Albany State University, where students used to take "foundations courses" before they took "credit-bearing classes." Now, under the corequisite model, "if you're admitted, when you take English 1101, you take what had previously had been our remedial course simultaneously with it. So, you take English 0999 at the same time."

Mr. Pitts has seen the positive impact of this new corequisite model, as "retention has improved and our pass rates with a C or higher in the courses that we've targeted have improved." There are also other added benefits, such as "more students come to support services than ever before," and they were able to place students in majors so that now there are "no undecided majors."

These benefits are particularly important for the student population at Albany State University. Mr. Pitts says "the vast majority of them are just underprepared." However, Mr. Pitts does not blame the student for being underprepared, but rather realizes that "no one has taught them study habits" or told them "what's being expected of them." He also puts some of that responsibility on himself. "It comes down to how well I am communicating the information to them." Once he gives the students that information, "they can follow through" and are "more than happy to do" the work.

Mr. Pitts noted that initiatives like *Strong Start to Finish*, and the support they provide, are imperative "to help these students to progress." He finds that "the students who are often left out in these initiatives—who are affected the least but who need it the most—are actually the students [who] are most addressed by these" initiatives. And Albany State University has "actually seen great improvement as a result of it."

Beyond his own university, Mr. Pitts acknowledged the larger benefit to the state: "Strong Start to Finish has been a key component" in the larger umbrella of University System of Georgia reform initiatives. These reforms are "dealing with learning support specifically as well as the ways that students progress through their first year and into their additional years as they enter into higher education."

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