

Teaching Statement: Stephen Pitts

My teaching experience includes three different experiences: three years as a high school math teacher at an all-male Jesuit high school in Dallas, two years as an adjunct instructor in a liberal arts honors program at a Jesuit university in San Francisco, and three years as a PhD student at the public school University of Minnesota. Each has formed me into the teacher I am today.

First, I began my teaching career as a high school math teacher at Jesuit College Preparatory of Dallas. There, in a department of 14 teachers and as part of a faculty of 100, I learned the fundamentals of good teaching and the importance of collegiality. I taught a variety of preps across the three years: algebra 1 to remedial freshmen, who found more success in my class than in prior ones; algebra 2 course to many juniors, where I led a curriculum redesign; and a proof-based geometry class to honors sophomores that I conducted as a seminar. In each of these settings, I followed the same preparation technique: I began with the students in front of me; asked myself where I wanted to lead them at the end of the lesson, unit, or year; and designed a progression of activities and assessment methods to move the class along. My class did not exist in a vacuum. I coordinated with my colleagues who taught the same course (horizontal integration) and aligned curriculum across the four-year progression of courses (vertical integration).

Thanks to the teaching-focused culture of the school, I learned about a variety of instructional techniques: not only direct instruction but also group exercises, not only standardized exams but also individual projects, and activities not only inside the classroom but also outside the classroom. My geometry students visited an art museum to learn about geometric transformations in the artwork, my algebra 2 students designed and presented a business plan in a unit on linear programming, and my honors precalculus students estimated the volume of a space in the school building. Colleagues who taught physics helped me to emphasize the relationships between the mathematical techniques that we learned in algebra 2 and the way that the students used them in physics classes. Moreover, the school transitioned to a 1:1 iPad program during those three years, so I learned about the opportunities and challenges of the use of technology in the classroom as well as how to effectively incorporate a learning management platform in a class.

This experience prepared me well as to serve as a member of an economics department. I would build relationships with colleagues who taught the same or adjacent courses to improve curricular alignment, work with colleagues to share best practices in teaching, employ a variety of instructional techniques inside and outside the classroom, and invite students to make connections between economic theories and their own practical experiences.

More recently, as a PhD student in the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota, I have taught discussion sections of both an advanced course (PhD econometrics) and a basic course (Principles of Microeconomics). In both cases, I approached the job the same way as at Jesuit Dallas: learning the names and building rapport with the students, many of whom were struggling with the transition to college and the aftereffects of the pandemic; designing discussion sessions with active learning and feedback; writing effective assignments; grading and returning papers promptly; and being available for individual conversations. As a result of my excellent performance my second year, the department gave me its 1000-level teaching award for Principles of Microeconomics and asked me to continue with the PhD econometrics section, this time for the entire four module sequence.

In my fourth year in the PhD program, the department asked me to redesign an upper-division major course in the Microeconomics of International Development. Based on my prior experience, I made it more student-centered and project-based. Instead of lecturing every class period, I split the time between student-centered and teacher-centered activities. On Mondays, pairs of students introduced the week's topic each Monday and designed an activity for their classmates. To my delight, the students enjoyed the experience running the class. Many had never felt ownership or a sense of community in a classroom before. Then on Wednesdays, I lectured to complement the material the students had introduced.

Moreover, through the semester, the students worked on designing and evaluating an intervention of their choosing based on the material in the class. I wanted the students to see that the tools of applied microeconomics could be used to gain insight around an issue or situation that they cared about. As undergraduate majors in agribusiness or agricultural economics, the majority of the students had never been exposed to the typical mathematical tools of the discipline. Most had never taken calculus. Nevertheless, at the end of the course, as they critiqued each other's project presentations and turned in their final reports, I came away with the sensation that I had instilled in them something more important: an openness and appreciation to a microeconomic way of looking at the world that could motivate future engagement with and coursework in economics.

In addition to these two experiences of teaching high school math and University-level economics, I also have experience with reading and writing intensive liberal arts courses. While I did my master's in economics at the University of San Francisco, I designed and taught three successive seminars in the University's undergraduate honors program, the St. Ignatius Institute. The experience stretched me: instead of all-male, mostly Caucasian students in Dallas, I taught mostly female BIPOC first-generation students. In the small seminars, we explored the relationship between science and religion, the role of technology in relationships, and the relevance of stories of the saints to our own spiritual autobiographies. The techniques of Jesuit teaching applied here as well. Above all, a classroom is a community that the instructor organizes where learning takes place. It is a safe space but not always a comfortable space because of the growth to which education always challenges us, even the instructor who has taught the same course many times. As the saying goes, I learned as much from the students as they did from me.

Finally, I have experience with community-based learning. For the past seven years, I have worked with the Batsil Maya coffee cooperative in Chiapas, Mexico on two field research projects. The first contributed to my master's thesis and the second to my dissertation. In a dozen trips to southern Mexico, I have brought undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff from Jesuit institutions for a variety of educational projects related to the cooperative. Because of my success, Santa Clara University asked me to help them develop an institutional relationship with Batsil Maya. More recently, I have begun a similar engagement with Jesuit-sponsored projects in Peru. I connected faculty and students from the University of San Francisco to three sites for fieldwork earlier this year and supervised one of the sites myself. More than ever, I am convinced that international relationships across the Jesuit network provide life-changing opportunities for our students. I would hope to continue to use these relationships in my own teaching.

Above all, I see myself as a teacher in relationship: relationship with the discipline, relationship with colleagues, relationship with students, and relationship with the broader world.