

Personal Statement

From Teaching to Coaching

Jose Antonio Carrasco

October 30, 2015

Working as teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been an extremely rewarding experience that has shaped both my career aspirations and my teaching philosophy. The beauty of teaching is that when we teach something, we learn it again. This contributes enormously in gaining a deeper understanding of the topics we teach to our students. For this reason, I will always be grateful to my students, since despite me being the one teaching, I am sure that I was one of the ones that learned the most. At the beginning, I tended to be more concerned with the way I was presenting the contents of the course to my students. But as time evolved I realized that this is just the starting point. Teaching is a far richer and wider concept: It is really an opportunity to guide students early in their career and to provide them with the environment that would allow their talents to flourish. In this sense is how teaching is essentially the same as coaching.

As a teaching assistant, I have been privileged to meet many students with different backgrounds. Same as a coach has different players with different abilities and motivations in his team, in the classroom we have different students that progress differently: each one with his own weaknesses and strengths. For this reason, the first main pillar of my teaching philosophy is to treat each student as an individual. As a consequence, I see each class as a different one, and I try to identify the key distinctive features of each group. Each class has its own dynamic in terms of the way I reason with my students, discuss and solve the problems. In my opinion this pillar is critical since it has allowed me to provide my students with knowledge in a way that fits them and thus, that transcends the classroom and is never forgotten.

To teach large classes, but at the same time to treat each student individually is not an easy task. In my opinion, this is a beautiful challenge posed by this activity, because it leads us to become great communicators able to transmit our ideas as clearly and efficiently as possible. More importantly, it lead us to become leaders able to motivate our students with knowledge and learning. These are part of the ideals that guide my work as a teaching assistant and still represent a challenge every time I begin a new class.

Of course, there is no universal recipe to awake curiosity, interest and motivation in our students. Nevertheless, during my years at UW-Madison, I have identified some ingredients that contribute significantly to this purpose. In the first place, we have to encourage our students to stay positive when facing problems. Most of my teaching career has been teaching graduate students, in the Phd in economics program. To pursue such degree is a life-changing decision that requires strong commitment and high degree of enthusiasm on the part of the student, and in most of the cases also on the student's family. This puts a lot of stress on the student's shoulders, who same as players in a team, feel the pressure of "*having to win*". For this reason, part of my teaching philosophy is to help my students

to maintain a positive and optimistic attitude, especially when facing difficult moments. We have to make students realize that everyone, including world champions and top academics, have good days and bad days. Second, it is important to help students to set their goals. The same way a coach would do, I encourage them to have intermediate and long-range goals. I have seen how this allows the student to develop the proper character to face daily problems, to reduce frustration when things go wrong, and ultimately meet their goals. Third, I have realized the importance of early stages in the course. Same as in a marathon, most of the failures are explained by mistakes made at the beginning. Therefore, I emphasize the importance of having a good start, where study habits are firmly established. Finally, regarding the student's concerns with grades, I always tell them that grades are only "*running pace indicators*", that show how slowly or fast they are moving. This way, as a coach and athlete would do along a race, teacher and student can re-optimize their study strategy along the course.

In these four years of teaching I have come to realize that teaching also happens outside the classroom, and in many ways. For example, during office hours students ask more particular questions that have kept them struggling for a long time. Same as a coach is for his team, we should always be available to our students. Players rely on their coach. Similarly, students will look for our guidance as teachers, and we should be there for them. This allows honest dialogue, without fear and enhances the trust between teacher and student. As a consequence, students lose their fear of participating in class and thus, they are exposed more often to new ideas, with the consequent enrichment of all class participants. In my work as a teaching assistant this trust building has also been a constant challenge and is a main pillar of my teaching philosophy.

On the other hand, knowing the purpose of every homework or assignment is an important aspect for the student. This puts another challenge to teachers, because we have to be able to design homeworks and exams adequately, and explain their purpose. When a coach assigns his team with special work, each member of the team should know the purposes of every workout. This way, they do not feel it is wasted time and understand how each problem in a homework helps them. Although exercising could be sometimes hard or even boring, under this perspective, it should always be rewarding. They should feel that they learn something from it, otherwise it is an empty activity.

Another important pillar of my teaching philosophy is that good teachers have to be good researchers also. Teaching without doing research is in serious danger of becoming outdated. Exploring frontiers in research helps to provide a better perspective on the merits and limits of the principles that are being taught. Excellence in teaching also contributes to research, since we are able to explain our ideas in a more clear way and to broader audiences.

This is my teaching philosophy that I recall every day when entering a classroom. I always go willingly to lead my classes, to motivate my students in such a way that the outcome is unique. I always devote special attention to the key features of my students, reminding them that we are a team, the classroom is the field, and most importantly, that learning is teamwork. We are in a position to be a very important person, loaded with the enormous responsibility of shaping the virtues of our students. This is something we should never forget and we should remind it to ourselves every day. As consistency is the key for success, same as a coach does for his team, we should strive every day so that our students achieve their goals, without surrender to the problems they will encounter along the way.