

APRENDICES | T1: E6 Alvaro Galiana

Desgrabación corregida - Inglés

Link: [Aprendices IT1| Episodio 6: Álvaro Galiana](#)

INTRO

What a teacher must convey to a student, and this is an artform in itself, is the capacity to foster doubts or problems in the listener, understanding that there are things we don't know, and remembering that each student may turn out to be the one who solves the problem.

Trusting the student in the sense of fostering the need to learn more.

PREVIA

I'm sure you haven't come to the theatre in a while since it's closed.

Well, I've come lately. But I never came to this sector.

Backstage. This is the back way.

You do get lost here, man...

Join us...

Hi, how are you? How are you, youngsters? Excuse me.

See the exit sign over there?

I've come, I've come lately... to listen to music a while ago. More than a while ago, a year or more... maybe two years. But this is beautiful.

It's OK. Come on, come on. It's OK.

May we sit?

Álvaro, just in case, did you put your phone on vibrate?

I left it in my jacket so it wouldn't give me a headache...

Is the silent mode on?

Yes, I suppose so. It's always silent.

(Laughter).

CHARLA

How do I define myself? It's a good question.

I define myself as a doctor, specifically as a pediatrician since I've always dedicated myself to treating children and teenagers, and as an infectologist, really.

Actually, before becoming a pediatrician I began working in the laboratory. Microbiology was a passion for me since my childhood.

So I'm an infectologist, because I try to pour everything I know about microbiology, since I'm a microbiologist as well, into medicine.

It's one thing to be a microbiologist and talk and look at Petri charts and bacteria and peering through the microscope, and another thing is to look at sick people, specifically sick children, and applying everything one knows about microbiology, into medicine.

Basically, I started out as a microbiologist but I never had doubts I would become a pediatrician, in some way.

There's a more laboratory-like, more objective, more solitary side, but there's also a need to be with others and look after them. How were you able to weave those two sides in your life?

Deciding to study medicine is to decide something more than a type of job or a university career: it's to decide a way of life that will be with you until the end.

You realize after 30, 40 years that what you decided at 20 or at the end of high school and that seemed so exciting and active and spectacular, takes a toll. At 50 or 60 you think: "Why didn't I pick a career that allowed for a nice, pleasant break on weekends?"

However, as time goes by, you realize you could not have chosen differently. I, personally, liked it from the get-go, and I wanted to be a doctor since I was a teenager.

It's likely that it's connected to one's story growing up. Well, we were a lot of brothers, but my father was a doctor, a microbiologist, and he got calls from everywhere, and, well, looking at him you thought: "God, what an important guy. One day, I want to be as important as my father". And I think that grows with you, since you were a kid, then a teenager, and so on.

In addition to all that, it so happened that my father died very young, when I was still a high school student. So, that really leaves a mark, a heavy load that says: "Well, I've got to try to achieve what my father managed to accomplish in so short a time".

Álvaro, there comes a moment, I imagine, of crisis as well. The word "crisis" keeps coming up in these conversations...

No doubt.

Because, well, to many such a moment acts as a learning curve, or an impulse or drive. In that moment, what went through your head? Did you think about stopping, continuing? Did it motivate you? What happened there?

Well, many things go through your head, especially since it's not strictly a family problem; it's also a very difficult time in the history of the country.

I'm talking of 1974-1975, the beginning of the dictatorship. My brother was in jail; my father died of a disease that we knew might get complicated, though my brothers and I didn't see it coming.

I had practically begun working by then. I'd been to high school, where there was a lot of activism. I was suspended, then failed a year due to a suspension by the Conae, which was the National Council of Education back then. It was a fairly complicated situation.

I started working in the laboratory with my father because I liked it, but it was also due to having more free time that I could do it... And then I started working in a laboratory with charming people who were... there was my father, but also other people: laboratory technicians, adults... It was a place for grown-ups, for older people, and I was just 17 years old.

And that gave me essentially a full year of high school where I learned my way through the lab and its tasks: washing plaques, cleaning the material, preparing the swabbins, learning about sterility in a laboratory, hygiene in the laboratory.

Then I started university, but I kept my job at the lab... Due to an essentially economic aspect, after my father's death, I had to put more work into what initially had been just accessory: "Well, he has nothing to do so he works a bit at the lab". It became something more necessary.

That also instilled a certain security. Maybe security arises out of crisis. Going into Medical Faculty, as well as the laboratory background... and joining them both, systematizing them, assimilating them with Pediatrics in general, allowed me to gain the kind of knowledge some people never attain.

I could see the study of biology as a way of protecting yourself from complex situations. What else have you found in biology?

Well, like you say, it's something you hold on to in such a critical context, family-wise, economic, individual, personal; in a time of so much fear and some instances of illegal activism. Holding on to something one enjoys is also a way of escaping and dedicating more time to things that are less complicated than the reality around you.

And in that context, well, one tries to survive and take something positive out of it. You hold on to a kind of liana, and say: "I'll dedicate myself to studying, and knowing more".

Then, later, and you see this more often in medicine these days, I learned about medicine based on... learning based on problems.

What is it? When you're in first, second or third year of university, you don't know everything about medicine. However, there may be a disease that worries you, fascinates you. You've seen it in the lab, manifesting itself with certain characteristics. And you don't know everything about medicine, you don't... you haven't even studied hematology or anything, but you dedicate yourself to studying the disease and all its aspects, learning from it even if you don't know about the other diseases that may be on the same level. You accumulate learning as you go through university.

Living with the kids of the neighborhood was another influence on me. Having lived next to whole families who had had polio, which we saw in "Forrest Gump", the kid with metals on his legs. A kid like him was a friend of mine from the neighborhood, who had his metals for walking, since he couldn't walk because of polio.

After a while, that boy who remained my friend for a long time, asked me what polio was.

So studying meant... they asked me because they knew I was into medicine. If someone got hurt or sick they'd say: "Come, Álvaro, what should we do with this one here, what shouldn't we do". It came naturally. The others were playing football, but they wouldn't call them. They called me, and if someone got hurt, it fell on me to decide what to do and what not to do.

And that period of having to study polio to explain it to someone who had it at birth, who is alive only by some miracle, suffering from the consequences of distal paralysis in both his legs due to polio... having to explain him that.

When you have to teach or explain something to someone, you have to understand it clearly and totally. It's one thing to read it and understand it, and another to think you understand it. When you read it and try to explain it to another person, that's when you realize what you understood and what you didn't.

Trying to explain something is always central to confirm one's knowledge of the subject.

In some way, that has helped me all my life. I've always tried to explain and teach what I understand. When I teach it to someone, that's when I realize if I understood it or not. If I know or I don't. Because that is basically what teaching is, in some way.

When did you realize that it wasn't enough to know a lot about diseases, but that it was important to relay your knowledge as well?

Well, what happens is that you spontaneously grow into teaching. The idea of teaching is inherent to my training, and it's inherent, in a way, to medicine. Everyone who goes into medicine becomes a teacher in a practically spontaneous way.

What you try to get across to students is that they must go to the sources, to the books, into sectors: "I want to learn about this disease, to know more; and first I must see a kid, a patient suffering from the disease, and then go to the books afterwards". It's always the same cycle.

So it's always a kind of coming-and-going, because you learn exercising, you learn acting on things, doing things. You don't learn just with books, and you don't learn just by treating patients, because you need more than that.

I think the difficult thing in medicine is for both things to come together: the scientific aspect of medicine which we can read in books, research papers, essays. And there's the reality of the situations, what we call normal life, daily life, around the kid or the patient, the person who is sick, and trying to be as human as possible. Because, even though there's strictly a scientific reason behind what we do, practicing medicine is something different; it's not merely practicing science.

Practicing science can be done in the laboratory, but creating a bond with your patient is a matter of humanism, of humanity, and rapport.

In that sense, teaching medicine is hard, because you have to base yourself on science, but then there's a human aspect, the human aspect of people and communication. Trying to make yourself understood to the people you're communicating with, and viceversa: that's probably what takes up the most time in medicine. Trying to blend both things together: the human side and the scientific side.

Which elements could you give us or ask of us teachers? Seeing as you're also a student. Well, a doctor is forever a student, as is a teacher, too...

No doubt...

Which aspects could teachers reconsider in order to be able to promote this kind of thinking?

You have to appeal to... Knowledge today is written. You access it on a computer, via Google... The strictly scientific side can always be achieved.

But what a teacher must convey to a student, and this is an artform in itself, is the capacity to foster doubts or problems in the listener, understanding that there are things we don't know, and remembering that each student may turn out to be the one who solves the problem.

That is, trusting the student, not by giving him certainties, but by fostering the need to learn more in a situation of uncertainty. To convey those uncertainties so the student understands he must dig deeper in every subject.

I repeat: If I go to a congress, I don't necessarily expect to be told something new, because such explanations already exist in a written form, and I know what to expect from them. The teacher who is giving a masterly conference in a high-profile congress already wrote all about that.

But when I listen to him, I find myself thinking: "This guy, what was his process? What makes his reasoning a role model for me; what made him want to dig deeper?"

Knowing that each person and each mind has different neurons distinct from everyone else. We're not all computers, we're minds, each with a different story, evolution and learning curve. Knowing that each one of us can make an impact, or understand something the other person didn't, and we can go deeper into those parts.

I don't know if I'm being too complex. But basically it's about conveying that things aren't finished. They're halfway there, and we need new people to think them through and get digging, so we might solve them.

I'll say it again: I look at any scientific subject today and I know I've got plenty to read and much of it has already been decided, but when I'm speaking to other people about vaccines, about immunity, about an infectious disease, I try to make them understand that they too can focus on certain aspects no one has seen before, and that they can go deeper, and follow that road... And that any mind can do it, not just those in other hemispheres.