



a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap

Episode 1: What We're About

[Theme Music]

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach, and how they overlap.

[Music fades out]

Adam: So this is episode 1, and in episode 1, we thought we'd tell you what we're about.

Dinur: The first thing that we wanted you all to know is, you know, Adam coaches; I teach. But both of us work with students, not courses, and there's a huge difference between the two. Anyone can go through basic material and read it in front of a class, but to effectively teach, and to help students actually learn, you have to treat students - shockingly, I know! - as individual people. We've got to see what they know, what they don't know, and how their skills and knowledge are developing.

Adam: And we want to reach two groups, here, with this podcast. So first, we want to help students understand what's expected of them when they get into college prep or college, which is pretty much anyone who's from about tenth grade on. And we want to help teachers, including professors, by offering tools and insights that they can bring to their classrooms and their students. Dinur and I have built up huge toolboxes of teaching and coaching and understanding how learning works, and we figure this is something that needs a wider audience.

Dinur. Exactly. We really want to share our knowledge and the benefit of our experiences, both with people who teach and people who learn. We want to talk about different learning-related topics, looking at how we learn, what research shows about how we learn, what - something that we as instructors might not think about, but the different stressors that our students have, and something that students might not have considered: the stressors that teachers have, both about learning and how to overcome difficulties.

Adam: So this podcast is going to run the gamut: from the problems of the first-year teacher, to the problems of the first-generation student. We're also going to talk about the students who may hit a bump when they

reach the limit of their knowledge about how learning actually works. And this usually happens at four main “pinch points:” the start of middle school, the start of high school, the start of the junior year of high school, and starting college - and for different reasons, and we’ll get into that in just a minute.

So we become teachers, and coaches, because we love learning. We love it. It’s fun for us. But a lot of our students don’t realize that, and a lot of our colleagues seem to have forgotten it.

Dinur: Yeah, I completely agree. At some point - and I think you’ve hit on four of them - learning stops being fun. If we remember what it was like in elementary school --

Adam: Mm-hmm.

Dinur: -- you know, looking at science projects, like, even back then - part of the reason we enjoyed it was because learning was something fun. We weren’t burdened by tests as much; we weren’t worried about homework. And along the way, or along the lines - that idea of “learning can be fun” got lost.

Adam: And, you know, it’s funny that you mention this. Because, you know, I also teach college, but I see myself as an academic coach first.

Dinur: Mm-hmm.

Adam: And when I start my classes, one of the things I tell my students is, I want them to learn how to make learning fun again - how to learn to love learning again - and about half of them look at me like I’ve just grown a second head. And then I do this little trick, I do this little test - I say, “Okay, everybody put your hand up, and I’m going to name off ages. And when I reach the age when learning stopped being fun, put your hands down.” And so I start off at five years old - kindergarten, then six, seven - and a few hands drop at ten and eleven, but at thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen - you know, like, the early teenage years - boom, all the hands, like two-thirds of the hands are down. And I say “Okay, oh, my goodness, look what happened there. What happens when you hit thirteen?”

And they say “Middle school.” Or sometimes, “High school,” you know. And high school is confusing! High school - middle school is confusing! Suddenly there are six or seven different teachers, and six or seven different classrooms, and six or seven different sets of classmates that you have to adjust to every single day. And high school’s the same, but it’s still - it’s so much more change than you’re used to in elementary school.

And of course, there are also - you know, the whole social world becomes important when you hit your teenage years.

So I ask my students, you know, I’ve asked my students, to please, “when you come to class, from now on, go back to being six - because everybody still loved learning at six. Everyone’s hand was still up at six.” And it’s not even science - it’s as simple as, “remember when the teacher took the red paint, and the - and the blue paint, and mixed them and you got purple paint, and everyone went “[gasp] That’s so cool!” You know? Or you went outside the first time it rained, and there were all the worms on the pavement, and everybody’s looking at the worms, and either they’re going “ew! that’s gross!” or “ooh, that’s cool!” but, something fun, right? And I ask them to bring their inner six-year-old - not in behavior, of course, but in attitude - to class and try to find things that make them go “ooh, that’s so cool.”

Dinur: And one thing that stands out to me, with you calling yourself a coach, is I employ the same term. I call myself a coach in the classroom. And I tell my students, the first or second day, “The job of any coach is to put their players in the best position possible to succeed, but that plan’s going to go nowhere if the players don’t put that effort in.”

Adam: Mm-hmm.

Dinur: The players have to put the effort in to make the plays; the coaches come up with the designs. I give my students what they’ll need to succeed, but they have to put that time and that effort in. And -

Adam: And I think it’s important, too, that we talk about time, because so many of them don’t understand the relationship of time to success. You know, they think that if they just stress themselves out, then they’ve put in the effort. When I tell my students, when I tell my coaching clients: “The teacher cannot see how stressed out you were. The teacher cannot see how many nights of sleep you lost. All they can see is what you turned in. And if what you turned in is not quality work, that’s what you’re going to get graded on, is non-quality work.”

And they look at me, like, “But don’t - don’t you know how stressful this assignment is?” I say, “For some students, it’s not stressful at all.” And the idea that some of them aren’t stressful is also one of those things that students really have a problem with.

And, and I think that leads into the idea that they can’t see us - or at least, they don’t see us - as a coach. They don’t see us as a mentor. They tend to see us as the enemy.

Dinur: Right.

Adam: We were talking about this before we started recording, and you said, you know, “They see us as the adversary.”

Dinur: Right. We’re the ones keeping them from getting that A, rather than the people developing their skills, trying to increase their knowledge and, you know, them getting some grade at the end.

Adam: Mmm-hmm. I tell my students, you know, “I do not give you a grade. I assign the grade based on whether you met a standard. You do not have to cage-fight me for your grade; you know, it’s not like I’m keeping a limited number of A’s and doling them out, it’s - the students who have reached that standard get that grade.” And, you know, and we’ll talk about, later - the misconceptions that a lot of people have, both students and teachers, about grades - especially at the college level, because they’re not like they are in high school.

And, you know, back to the “adversary” thing, you know, a lot of students are convinced that we’re just out to trick them.

Dinur: Right.

Adam: You know, I’ve had students come to me and say “This writing assignment. Where’s the trick?” You know? And I’ve written a very straightforward, Purpose-Task-Criteria assignment sheet, which is from the work of Mary-Ann Winklemes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where you’re very transparent about “This is absolutely everything you need. Here’s all the steps,” and they come to me and they say “Where’s the trick? What aren’t you telling us?”

And there's got to be a way to help students understand that we're not the enemy. I just haven't found it yet.

Dinur: Yeah.

Adam: I tell them, "I am not your enemy," but telling them - and they don't seem to understand. They keep looking for the trick question. They keep looking for the trick assignment. They keep looking for "How is this teacher trying to trip me up?"

And teachers, we're talking to you: if you like to give trick questions, cut it out. Because that's not helping your students. All it's doing is making them suspicious and afraid, and that's not conducive to learning.

Dinur: One thing I think - or two basic rules, rather. And they're related - I think help students learn. One is, we start from a base of respect. We respect our students as scholars. We respect them as students who are entering a new phase in their lives. We respect them as adults, and we make that respect very explicit.

Adam: Mm-hmm.

The second part - one thing that I like to do with my students, is I explain why I assign the assignments, and how I test. And I tell them, "Yeah, I'm asking you questions about the material." But if I make a test open-book, open-note, I want to see how just much time they've spent preparing so that they can, you know, effectively use their test time, you know, to use the book and their notes for, you know, maybe a few questions that they don't, that they're not quite certain on.

Adam: Mm-hmm.

Dinur: The ones who try and read through everything and don't finish, hopefully learn the lesson that, you know, you've got to start coming in prepared.

Adam: The thing is that some of our students - especially those of us who are older professors, who went to high school in the 1980s and before - we assume that our students got the same kind training that we did. But they don't have the study skills that we think they should have, and they don't have the same time management skills that we think they should have, because nobody taught them these things. And they don't know the norms of how to interact with their professors, because that's not the same as how their high school teachers interacted with them.

And then there's this whole problem with college being a completely different culture from high school. They, they don't know the norms - and so, they're kind of lost - and many of us who were in college prep earlier on really don't understand why they're so different, or why their needs are so different, or why their skill sets are so different.

Dinur: Students are coming in lacking time management and study skills, and I think that there are a lot of us, as instructors, who assume - because we've done so much time in school - that everyone in school's going to know exactly how to manage their time. And all then - let's face it, a lot of us, even as teachers, procrastinate. So we're not always experts, or we're not always great at practicing what we preach. But we certainly do not get to assume that, you know, the experience we have in managing and knowing how to prioritize our tasks, you know, after years and years and years of doing it, are going to be apparent to someone who's starting college for the first time.

Adam: So, yeah, and that gets us into the groups of students who have specific problems, who have special problems - like first-generation students. They don't have role models for college. They don't know anyone who's gone through this process. So they don't know the norms of college behavior or the norms of anything about being a college student, because they've never been exposed to those norms. And their goals are often not what we would think of as "college goals." Their goal may be to rush through all of their classes and get a job, and that's because, for them, the goal of college is to just get a job - not to necessarily learn anything. Or they might have big misconceptions - I had a first-generation student recently who said "Well, office hours are when I'm not supposed to bother the professor, right?" The- the idea of office hours was completely foreign to them, and office hours -

Dinur: Ohhh, they misunderstood it as "that's the time we're in our office to avoid people," rather than "that's the time we're in our office to see them."

Adam: Exactly. They didn't realize that that was time reserved for them. You know, and they just - there's a lot of misconceptions that first-generation students are dealing with. And that's something that we will get into - that we will talk about - later in this podcast. Not in this episode, of course, but in later episodes.

Dinur: Right.

Adam: And finally, I just want to touch on the "pinch points." And the pinch points, as I said at the beginning of this podcast, are when you start middle school, when you start high school, when you start the junior year of high school, and when you start college. And we talked about this a little bit, about learning not being fun when you hit middle school and why, and that's the main reason it's a pinch point - because, suddenly, there's so much more you have to manage, and there's so many more people, and there's just so much more. And then you get into high school, and the expectations are a little different.

You know, middle school is this weird place where the workload is kind of like when you were in sixth grade, or fifth grade, but it's not entirely high school workload. And then suddenly you get to high school workload, and it's much more demanding, even in your freshman year. And then, you know, and then you get into the middle part of high school, and you hit junior year, and that's when it starts to be all about "college prep, college prep, college prep." You have to worry about the SATs. You have to worry about the ACTs.

Dinur: Right.

Adam: You have to worry about all those other standardized tests. You have to worry about testing to get out of high school, these days. That didn't happen when I was in high school in the eighties. And, you know, and there's an enormous amount of stress around college, college, college.

And then when you start college, all the learning skills you had from high school no longer work. Because high school, these days, learning is just memorization, memorization, memorization, memorization, and then you get to college and they expect you to apply, and they expect you to analyze, and they expect you to extend ideas, and they expect you to do all kinds of things that do not involve "cramming information into your head and spitting it out on the tests." So those pinch points are really important for a lot of college students.

And, so -- the way we're going to organize this podcast, just to finish up before we, before we --

Dinur: Wrap up.

Adam: Just - just to wrap up, before we -- you know -- is: we're going to talk about a learning topic. And that could be anything: it could be how to study, it could be how to study this specific thing, how to read a set of directions. It could be from the teacher's perspective: how to get the students to understand that this is actually what you expect them to do, and you're not just suggesting it!

We'll have all kinds of learning topics, from all points of view. And then after we talk about that learning topic, and a little bit about, you know, what we know about it, what we've learned about it, what the research says about it, how it works in our classrooms - then we'll talk about how teachers can use it, and then we'll talk about how students can use it. So we'll give it from both sides: what the teacher's use of this learning topic would be, and then what the student's use of it would be.

And sometimes, some podcasts, we may focus entirely on teachers, and some we may focus entirely on students. You know, for example, you know, "how to study for a test" doesn't, probably doesn't relate to teachers very much --

Dinur: Right.

Adam: -- but maybe thinking about "how your students are studying for the test, and teaching them how" - that might be something that you'd need to know, so --

Dinur: Absolutely.

Adam: -- so, depending on the podcast, we may lean more teacher-heavy or more student-heavy, but in every case, we will talk about "why this applies to what teachers do, or how it does," and "how it applies to what students do."

Dinur: And, to be fair, just because you may not be the intended audience doesn't mean that there isn't something worthwhile listening. If you're a student and you wanted to know what your teachers are thinking, I mean, we can't get into every one of their minds, but we can explain, like, the methods from our madness in teaching.

Adam: Right.

Dinur: If you're a teacher, and you want to know what stresses your students are facing, we'll talk about that.

Adam: Yes, we will. In-depth and in detail.

So, that said, thank you for joining us for this first of our - many, hopefully! - podcasts. This was episode 1, and we will see you later.

[Theme Music]

Adam: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

Adam: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeasier

Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week.

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