



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

Episode 2: Pulling Back the Curtain

[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. 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: This is Episode 2, and in Episode 2 we're going to talk about "pulling back the curtain." And this is about things that students don't understand about what teachers do, how we do it, and even why we do it. And we're going to talk about five main things today. The first thing we're going to talk about is why we set up our courses the way we do. So I'll let Dinur riff on that for a little bit.

Dinur: Oh, absolutely. Thank you, Adam.

So something that we always try and communicate to our students is what we want them to learn, both in terms of material but also in terms of skill. And the way we do that, when we're trying to be effective, is we try to schedule our outlines and schedule our topics so that one kind of leads into another and builds on one another.

But that said, one thing that I always tell my students early on in the semester is: "Your first few lectures are probably the driest material we will deal with." And I tell them that I'm not trying to put them to sleep; I'm not trying to get them to drop the class; but the dry material always sets us up for more interesting, juicier material to get to during the heart of the term. And so, if we don't have a basic foundation, how can we expect to build a good house? How can I expect my students to know what I'm talking about, if we haven't given them - or if I haven't given them - certain tools early on?

Adam: Yeah, and I was thinking about this particular thing this morning - about how it's going to be boring in the beginning, and then it'll get really interesting once we get past the boring. And it seems like no matter what class I teach - because I also teach - I'll be prepping - this morning I'm prepping for a theory class, and part of the theory class, I'm required to teach them how to construct a theory. Well, that means they need to know all the different building blocks.

So I'm trying to make it a little more interesting. I've given them a lecture, it was pretty dry - that they watched online - and I was creating a Kahoot! Quiz, so they could basically check: do I know all of this material? But it's still pretty basic, pretty dry: here's a way to categorize theory! Blah... and until they get to the actual material, it's going to be, "Why am I learning this?"

I had a student yesterday say, "Why did I read all this stuff in the book if I'm not going to be using it in class today?" and I said "Well, because the book is supplemental. You're going to get most of what you need from the lectures." But we also have to think about - you know, it's great to learn about, say, how this education system works, or how this criminological issue is approached, but if you don't have the basic undergirding background, then you're lost, because it's just "here's an interesting story!" instead of "how do we connect this to what the main points are in the course?"

And some of the considerations we have to make - I've had students say, "Why didn't you cover chapter 9 and chapter 10 in the book?" and that's because we only have 15 weeks, and so I had to make a decision about, all right, what am I going to emphasize? In the fall, there are two days that I have to take off due to religious considerations, so in the fall if I'm teaching a criminology class, they don't get a class on organized crime, because organized crime, for me, is a three-day arc of classes. But in the spring, I don't have to take any of those days off, so I am able to give them the three days of organized crime, but then I drop the juvenile delinquency day, because I need that day for organized crime.

So these are considerations we have to make, too, in terms of what we're going to present. A lot of students come into college and they assume that "They're going to teach me everything in the book." When really, when you get to college, one of the things you need to know is that the book is something for you to read, but the teacher may not even talk about the book at all. They may talk about other things, and the book is sort of, "Look, here's the basic stuff you need to know to do what you need to do, but we're not going to talk about that in class."

Dinur: And I know, for me, I'm teaching an intro to sociology course right now, and I'm structuring my class a bit unconventionally, where from about day two, we start hammering methods, right away, before we get into concepts, because - assuming that most of my students aren't taking this in their fourth year to try and finish up some units, research is something they're going to have to struggle with and they're going to have to deal with in future classes.

Adam: Mm-hmm.

Dinur: You know, even if they're not sociology majors, I want to give them the background to knowing how to do research, and to understanding why theory is important. And I really try and emphasize that these are two sides of the same coin, because something I've seen is: students tend to think of theory as one universe, research as its own universe, without a link between, and I want to try and emphasize that, "No, these are two things that go together - they try and explain what we're seeing," but my trade-off is I'm not going through the book. I'm not giving them a lot of terminology from the book early on; I'm having them read and I'm giving them some low-stakes quizzes to see how they do.

Adam: And then the other thing about considerations is, for example, if you're teaching an intro class, most of your students aren't going to be majors in your discipline. I remember back when I was in undergrad, I was taking a sociology 100 course, and there was a math major, and he said "This is really useless to me. How am I ever going to use it in my life?" and the teacher had some trouble explaining that. And for those of us who

aren't math people, we might say "Apart from balancing my checkbook, when am I ever going to use math in my life? Algebra doesn't seem to be useful, to me."

So one of the things that I would recommend that the teachers do is make clear to the students, "this is the reason why we've got this boring stuff at the beginning." If I teach a stats class, I actually spend about two weeks going back over algebra, to make sure that students are aware of, "Here's what we need to do. Don't be afraid of math." I have them explain some very basic stuff, like how addition works, without using the word "add," and how subtraction works, without using the word "subtract," so that they get used to explaining results, explaining mathematical results, without using the terms of the math. And some of the students have told me that my statistics boot camps have really made them more confident, even though it looked like dry material at the time. When they get into running a t-test, they're saying, "Oh, I remember this from the stats boot camp. This is what this means."

And so I recommend that no matter what subject you're teaching, that if you have to, give a boot camp kind of thing at the beginning of the class. And a lot of instructors do have to give that. They have to say, "This is the basic foundation as Dinur said, on what we're building, you need to know that." So students, be aware of that when you're taking a class, it may seem really boring, but almost always, there is a method to the teacher's madness. There's a reason that they're telling you about this very basic stuff, because in week 10, you might need to know it. You might need to be able to pull back on that.

When I teach a deviant behavior class, I teach two or three main deviant behavior theories and ways of categorizing different kinds of different behavior. And then we talk about -- after that, once I've taught them "here are the categorization ways, here's the way you're going to categorize all these things," then I talk about this kind of deviant behavior and that kind of deviant behavior. And I have them go back and use what they learned in the first two weeks about how to categorize, and it deepens their understanding of the material. So that may be the reason that your teacher's asking you to do the stuff that doesn't seem to have any connection to the material, but it does. Okay? There is a method to our madness.

Now, the second thing is that we design the assignments to meet the goals of the course. And if you've ever looked at the syllabus, and it might have something like "course goals" or "course objectives" or "learning objectives." These are the things that, usually it's our departments that tell us, "You've got to make sure they learn this stuff. This is what you have to cover in the course." So when we design an assignment, a lot of times, students may think of it as just "busywork." So, for example, if you look at, you've got a worksheet every week that your teacher has you do, you may say, "This is just busywork, why am I doing it?"

Well, part of it might be to give you a low-stakes chance to learn something, without risking a lot of points or risking your grade. And another thing might be that it is something that repetition lends itself well to learning. That if you do it over and over again, it begins to stick, kind of like math. The best math teachers, they're not just teaching the current math, they also have review problems in every exam so that you are remembering that you also did this back in week three. Here it is on the week six tests or the midterm. You also have to know that so that you can grab that when you need it and you can use it when you need it.

So when I have a course goal, my course goals, what I will do is I'll look at them. And I'll usually try to develop one low-stakes, maybe two low-stakes, and one high-stakes assignment for each course goal. So that if you blow it on a low-stakes assignment, you can learn before the high-stakes assignment comes up. And I personally, I also try to design my classes so that nothing is really high-stakes, so that nothing is more than maybe 10% of your grade. So that if you do blow it on that assignment, you don't feel like, "Oh, God, I've just blown the entire class." Because remember, your teachers are not trying to set you up to fail, even though they

seem that way, we're not. It's just we expect you to learn. And sometimes that's hard.

Dinur: And I'm similar to you, although I think my high-stakes assignments go up to 15 or 20%. But my whole idea is, I don't want a bad test to torpedo a student's grade. I don't get joy out of giving a bad grade. And so I want everything to be a little bit lower-stakes. I make their term paper be worth about as much as one exam, or sometimes slightly more because I feel like that gives my students more control over their grade. They have a longer time to work on the material, they can talk to me a lot more, whereas they don't get to talk to me when they're taking an exam. And the whole idea is you want students to develop their knowledge, show that they're developing their knowledge and their skills. But you also don't want to put so much weight into a grade that a student might get paralyzed with fear of failure.

Adam: Because then the paralysis leads to failure, because students who get paralyzed with fear, they can't move forward. I've had students come to me and say, "I have test anxiety." And I tell them, "Don't worry, my tests are set up so that if you fail one, you get the chance to retake it, okay?" And I tried to set it up so that -- for example, all the tests I give my students, I give them at home. They can take them, they are either take-home tests or they are take-online-at-home-tests. So that if they need to sit there in their pajamas with a cup of hot cocoa, and I don't know, a plate of nachos or something, just so that they feel comfortable taking their exam, they can do that, okay.

And they can take it at a time that works for them. If they're a night owl and my class is at 8:30 in the morning, they're not going to be prepared for a test at 8:30 in the morning, they're going to be tired. And if they're a lark, and they're taking an evening class, they're done. They come to class, and they're already kind of -- maybe that's the only time that they could get that class. So then why make them take the exam at 10:00 at night or 9:00 at night, when they're tired? I try to arrange it so that the student can work with their own rhythms and take the exam when they feel like they're on top of things, when they feel like they're ready to do it.

So, and I'm not saying, "Oh, just let your student take the test whenever." But I am saying if you're going to schedule it on a day, you could schedule the exams outside of class. That gives you more time to do material in class. And you can schedule the exams outside of class, just make them open book, open note. There's almost nothing you're teaching that your students should have to memorize at this point, aAll right. I had a prof back in undergrad, I took a business math class, and he gave us open book exams. He says, "I don't expect you to memorize these. I expect you to keep the book on your shelf when you become an accountant so you can pull it down and look up the stupid formula. You shouldn't have to memorize this, you should just understand why you're doing it."

Dinur: And I'm very much the same way. My students take their exams online and they take them at home. I make them open book, open note, open reading. But I also tell them that they need to know their stuff because they will not have enough time to go through each and every slide, each and every reading as they're taking the exam. And I tell them, "I'm testing to see how well you can bring up this knowledge that we've talked about." How well you can analyze something if they're given a chart, and I helped build that we've covered in class. And I tell them, "I want you to take this when you're ready because I want to see your best work."

Adam: Yeah, and a lot of students don't realize this. So students, we're talking to you now. We want to see your best work. But your best work may vary from day to day. Like if you have a day like when we're recording this, this morning, my father-in-law had a heart attack this morning. And so now he's in the hospital. So I'm probably not completely at my best today. But you may have an experience where you just did not get enough sleep for whatever reason. You were up late dealing with a family issue or a relationship issue or you were sick, but bring your best shot to class every day that you can, and you'll do better. Bring your best self, bring

your best work, all right.

Don't turn in something just to turn in something. Really work on turning it in because you want to present your best work, because that's what we're looking for. And that actually brings us to our next topic in a way, because what are we looking for? Well, we're looking for your best work. But that doesn't mean that we're looking for you to memorize everything and spit it back out on the test. So when we design our test questions, a lot of students will say, "Well, I don't know what you're looking for." Well, tests are often multiple choice, even in college.

So a lot of it is do you know the terminology, but some of it, as Dinur was saying, is it's got to be, you've got to show that you can analyze this thing, or that you can take this tool that you've learned in class and apply it. There's a tool that I teach in my theory classes where I teach them how to break up a theory by five main things that all the theorists talk about. So if I were to give an essay question on an exam, I would probably say, using this framework that you've learned, and we've gone over in every lab class, take this theory and break it down and show me that you can break it down.

Well, that goes beyond memorization, right? When you're doing a test, the word "test" is a scary word. The word "exam" is a scary word. A lot of students just hear those words and they freeze. And so teachers, try calling them "quizzes" or even something like "knowledge assessments" so that the student doesn't hear the word exam or test and immediately go, "Ahhhh!!!" Because you don't want to have people panicking when they're taking your exams, you want people to be calm and taking them, with a good mindset about, "Okay, I've got this. I can do this." And Dinur, you wanted to mention something about the logic of the test question, exactly. Tell me more about that.

Dinur: So one thing that I do when I write my test is I actually do not have my students do short answers or four lessons on that exams. And I tell them that I do this on purpose that being I don't believe I get their best writing on a timed exam. They may throw a few concepts here and there, but I'm not going to see full analysis simply because there's not enough time to develop a good thought. So, what I do is I test my students kind of on their basic analysis and basic skills with multiple choice and with true/false questions. And for the most part, I try and ask fairly straightforward questions, with the exception that I am that jerk instructor who likes to do the "A and C," or "all of the above," as two answer choices, just to see how well students can bring up that information and go "Oh, right, we talked about these two things, but maybe not that third," versus how many people go "Yeah, that third kind of sounds right. We're just going with all the above."

I also told my students that I expect good writing when they do their term papers, because we schedule several workshops which actually model after Adam's student writing workshops. We do that in class. We have a class white brainstorming session, where I ask students to break down the questions I ask in their term paper prompt. We discuss it as a class and I post their answers, their responses on Moodle for them so that they have a resource to use, and they can say, "Oh, yeah, I was writing this. Oh, yeah, we talked about this, why don't I go back to that." But I expect a much better paper, because I've spent a lot of time working with in class. I allow them to come to my office hours, obviously, they can email me. So I want good, polished work by the time I read their final drafts.

Adam: And I want to go back to what you said about the logic of multiple choice/true-falsers. For me, what I'll do with a lot of multiple choice questions is, I won't give like the multiple choice question will be "which of these terms means blah", and then you list four terms. Well, what I do is I give a situation where they have to figure out "that's about this term."

So like, so in a criminology class, for example, and I pulled this from the musical “The Book of Mormon,” we're testing to see do they know the four types of deviance that a man named Becker listed. And one of them is the pure deviant, who does something deviant and does get caught. So he does something deviant. He gets caught, he gets punished. But then there's the secret deviant, who does something deviant and doesn't get caught and doesn't get punished. And then there's the falsely accused who didn't do anything wrong, but they get punished. And then there's the conformist, who didn't do anything wrong and doesn't get punished. So those are the four categories.

So what I wanted the students to do is look at the situation that I give them and decide which of those four terms applies to the situation. So I would say, “Kevin stole a donut and blamed it on his brother Jack, his parents punished Jack for taking the donut. In this situation, Kevin is a...” And then I give them four: secret deviant, pure deviant, blah, blah, blah. And they have to figure it out. And in this case, of course, Kevin would be a secret deviant because he did the bad thing. But he didn't get punished. Someone else did.

But I can ask the exact same question, and instead of saying “Kevin is...” what is Jack? Well, Jack would be falsely accused, right? And so that forces them to do a little bit of analysis.

So students, when you get a teacher asking questions like that, you've got to realize you're going to have to go deeper than just “here's the answer.” It's not just “here's the answer.” It's “why is that the answer?” You have to understand what you're being asked and not just treat it like, “Okay, I'm just going to spit back the answers.” And I've already caught students doing this in my first two weeks of classes at my current job that I'm teaching. I had a bunch of students misread a question because they were rushing. And I pointed that out. I said, “Okay, this is going to give you a hint about my tests, you need to read the question and make sure you understand it. If you rush, you will get it wrong. If you get it wrong, there's going to be problems.”

So and you talked about term papers, Dinur, that was the fourth thing we were going to talk about today is why do we make our students write so much? Because unless you're an English teacher, a lot of students don't expect writing. But then you get a writing assignment in your economics class, or in your history class, or even in your physics class. And you're like, “Well, why do I have to worry about things like spelling and grammar, I mean, this isn't an English class.”

And if you're in if you're in a course, that there's any kind of writing assignment, you need to understand the goal of writing is to communicate, not just to make your English teacher happy. And a lot of English teachers, and we'll do a podcast specifically on this later, we'll do an episode on this, a lot of English teachers teach a particular style of writing, the humanities style, which is very loaded with lots of vocabulary words, and lots of flowery language, and lots of beautiful phrases. But if you're writing a report for physics, that doesn't really work. You need to change to a different style of writing. And you need to learn how to write in that style as well.

And Dinur mentioned the writer's workshops; both he and I give writer's workshops to our classes where we talk about, “Okay, so you're in a social science, this is a science writing, not humanities writing. Now, if they were in an English literature class, they would be expected to write in a more florid, a more wordy style, because that is what that kind of class requires.” And so part of making you write, students, folks, is because we expect you to learn how to communicate what you know in more than one way, not just in taking an exam but in also telling us: “here's what I've learned, here's what I found out, here's why it's important, here's where the research and the support for it is.”

Dinur: And I've students that will absolutely resent me for this. But I give them the warning, if I ever see them starting a paper with “throughout history,” or “over the centuries,” or “over the course of humanity,” if they don't

have a source for it, I'm not counting it.

Adam: Yeah, there was a fellow who called that “throat-clearing.” “Since the dawn of time people have...” and I tell my students that this is basically you saying, “*ahem* I have nothing really important to say here. So I’m *ahem* just going to keep on *ahem* writing a lot of words and *ahem* hope that you haven’t *ahem* noticed that I haven’t said anything important in two paragraphs.” And a lot of my students look at me like, “But that’s how my English teacher taught me to write.” And for English classes, that’s how you write, but not for science, not for social science, not even for your econ class. You need to write in a clearer style. So, “Since the dawn of time...” stop using that. And teachers who are listening in if you want to see the writer’s workshops, you can email us just send us a message through the Patreon page at patreon.com/learningmadeeasier, and we’ll be more than happy to send you copies of the writer’s workshops.

Dinur: And one thing I told my students when they write their papers is that the faster they make their points, the faster I give them their points. So try and get them away from the flowery language. I want simple, I want direct, and I want very clear. I like to have them apply concepts from a certain article to a documentary and so I want them to work with the definitions of the concepts, explain them in their own words, and then tell me how they see these concepts in the documentary. And then I have them tell me which concept they thought was strongest of the ones they compared.

Adam: And that brings us to the last main point we want to make about the way that we design our classes is we aren’t just focusing on you doing this in our course, what we’re trying to do is get you to develop skills that you can use in other courses, in work, when you get a job. In our modern society, you can’t really get a job without knowing how to communicate in writing. You have to write emails, you have to write reports. I had a student say, well, where am I going to use this as a cop? And I said, “Aren’t you going to have to write reports? They’re going to have to be clear enough that the court will accept them, right? Because if they’re all jumbled, and gobbledygook and full of flowery words, nobody wants to read that. You need to write clearly, concisely and completely.”

And those are my three -- you know, you said the faster you make your points, the faster you get the points. Well, one of the buzzwords in my classroom is clear, concise, and complete, okay? You’ve got to write clearly, concisely, and completely. And I design my course around the idea that the stuff you writing is stuff you will need to do again, and again, when you get the job that you want to get, whatever that job is. And a lot of students think that it’s just busywork. I promise you, it’s almost never busywork. But what I’m hoping is that students have gotten something out of, you know, that’s why they do that.

And now, teachers, we want to talk directly to you.

You’ve got to make this stuff clear to your students. Because if you don’t make it clear to your students, you’re going to have resentful students. You’re going to have students who say, “Why should I bother doing yet another worksheet? What is the point?” You’ve got to show the students the point. One of the ways to make it clear to the students why you’re doing these things and why you’re assigning assignments is to use Mary-Ann Winklemes’ Purpose, Task, Criteria assignment sheet format, where you say: this is why you’re doing it, this is what you need to do, here are all the steps, and here’s how you’re going to be evaluated. This is the criteria; this is what I’m going to judge you against.

Because I’ve had students say, knowing that I really do expect them not to make more than two spelling errors per page has made them really, really aware that they need to check for spelling problems and not trust their spell checker. Because when we get to the podcast about that, we’ll talk about some of the amusing mistakes

that have been made with spell checkers. But you've got to make this clear to your students because if you don't, they won't know what you want. And if they don't know what you want, they're going to feel like you're not doing your job. So Dinur and I over the course of this week, we usually set up these or we're usually going to set up these episodes as we'll talk about the issue, and then we'll talk about how teachers can use it in how students can use it. But we've kind of interleaved that into our discussion this time.

So, Dinur, is there anything you want to say specifically to teachers or students? I think we pretty much covered the field here.

Dinur: I think we have both. But one thing that I'd like to remind teachers is that we're teaching students more than we're teaching courses. And what that means is, each of your classes is going to learn at their own pace. It may be faster than the pace you anticipated, it may be slower than the pace you anticipated. I'm right now going through a class where we're a little bit behind where I thought we'd be. But you have to be okay with that. And you have to be able to explain, 'Hey, here's what I'm trying to develop. And that development can take time.' But you have to explain that to your students. Because you want them to understand that you're in the same boat with them, rather than you're up above, telling them what to do and they're just moving around in the dark, not seeing what your larger point is.

You know what you want to get, because you're the one who writes the syllabus. You have your own ideas for what you expect to see in terms of progress. We know what we're looking for or we have at least an idea of what we want to cover, what we'd like to see, and we adjust as we go along. Our students weren't involved in that creative process, right? Our students aren't sitting in the room with us going, "Yeah, that seems like a good way to build this class or that seems like a really interesting topic."

Adam: Or this is like a good exercise, it'll get the point across, they don't see any of that. I had a student say to me, "Well, I thought that you guys just got a package from the department. And then you taught from it." And it turned out, they'd gone to a charter school, where their teachers were all given packages, and they weren't allowed to develop their own curriculum, they had to teach whatever the school taught them. And I said, "That's not how it works in college. That's not how this works. That's not how any of this works."

But the thing is, some of your students may think that you didn't actually do it, you were just handed it and you're just teaching some of the material that you were handed. They may not realize how much work you put into it. I prepped five classes last fall. And I spent the entire summer prepping. I was spending probably seven, eight hours a day, I mean, six days a week to get all these classes prepped and recorded, get all my videos recorded, get everything set up. But I had a launch trouble at the beginning of class. Of course, I was exhausted for the first two weeks of the semester. But that was okay, because I was at drop. But the thing is that a lot of the students don't realize how much work goes into these or how much time it takes to prepare all this stuff.

And then when they complain about how much time it takes to do a term paper, I'll say, "Well, I spent 39 hours prepping this class. So if you spend 10 hours on your term paper, I'm really not sympathetic. You should be able to spend that much time." But in any case -- so teachers, remember, you've got to pull back the curtain for your students. Because if they don't understand how you got to where you are, they won't understand how you expect them to get to where they need to be.

Dinur: And to me pulling back the curtain is us being honest with our students, and it's respecting them. It's showing them here's what we want you to do. Because both Adam and I take a coaching approach to teaching, and the job of a coach in any sport is to get their players in the best position to succeed. It's up to the players to

make the efforts and put in the effort to make the plays. Well, one way you can do that is by showing here's the scheme of the class. Here's what I want you to do. And here's what I need to see from you at these steps.

Adam: So that's the end of Episode Two. And when we come back with Episode Three next week, you'll hear about how we are going to explain how to slow down because learning is not a race and we'll see you then.

[Music]

Dinur: You've been listening to learning made easier a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

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

Dinur: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier.

Adam: And we look forward to seeing you next week.

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