



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

Episode 4: Intellectual Bulimia

[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, how we teach, and how they overlap.

[Music Fades]

Adam: This is episode 4 of Learning Made Easier, and today we're going to talk about what we call "intellectual bulimia," also known as "cramming."

Now, a lot of students cram because they've been taught to cram. The high school mindset almost demands cramming - that you're supposed to memorize and then spit it back out on the test. But the problem is that when you do that, you don't retain anything. It just - it goes in, it comes out and it's gone. If you're going to be learning, and if you're spending as much money as you're probably spending per semester or per quarter on your college education, maybe you want to get something more than just cramming it in and spitting it out for your money.

So today we're going to talk about why students cram, how teachers can guide students away from cramming, and how everyone can use this to move towards learning and away from just stuffing your head like a Strasbourg goose.

Dinur: Absolutely. So the first big question that we want to look at is why students cram. As teachers, we know that that's ineffective. We know that knowledge isn't deeply retained when students cram, but they do it regularly. Question is, why?

Well, coming out of the No Child Left Behind era, these students are coming to us fresh off of a battery of standardized tests throughout their academic careers. And these are tests that focus on memorization, very few basic skills - but they don't necessarily look for what we would call a good understanding or a good way of knowing things. They don't require analysis.

And so, this is a skill that students haven't been developing, because these tests don't measure that. So they are reduced to one mode of learning and that's memorization. Ultimately a lot of

them think that they can memorize something by reading one or two nights before an exam, and have that stick well enough to do well on the exam.

Adam: I think it's interesting that you focused on skills because just the other day I was listening to one of Brooke Castillo's Life Coach School podcasts, and she was talking about quitting and how quitting is a skill. That if you keep quitting, you get really, really good at quitting. Whatever you practice you get good at. So we're not saying that the students who cram are not good at it. They are - it's a skill they've developed. The problem is that it doesn't allow you to learn when you do that.

So if the goal is learning, instead of just passing a test, which are not the same thing, students are not prepared for the actual learning environment where, as you say, they need to learn how to analyze. They need to learn how to apply. Standardized tests don't check for that skill and that's one of the biggest problems. There was research that showed recently that the SATs don't actually predict your ability to get through college. They just predict your ability to get accepted to college, which is not the same thing. Being put on the team doesn't mean that you're actually going to be able to play the game.

Dinur: Exactly.

Adam: I think that we need to think about the fact that when students cram, they're practicing the skill of cram and spit it out, cram and spit it out. So they're really good at it. It's been twelve years of practice of "cram and spit it out."

Then they get to college. And college says, no, no, don't cram and spit it out and the students are, "but that's what I'm good at doing! that's what I thought I was supposed to be doing!"

We talked, I think in episode 1 or 2 about a college culture is not the same as high school culture. This is one of the big divides between how we do things in high school and how we do things in college.

So then that brings us to the second big issue is poor time management. Even if students want to learn, they have often, especially in the first couple of semesters, if they don't use an advisor, they may have weighted themselves down with like three extra units. At my campus, twelve units is considered a full load. You're supposed to do twelve units in the fall and twelve units in the spring and that is a full load. So they'll say, "well, I want to do fifteen units," because they think it's going to be like high school, they can do that.

So now they're weighted down with an extra class beyond what's considered standard, and they are not managing their time well. We won't be going into deep time management here, but we do have episodes coming up that we'll go deeply into how to manage your time, that students will probably benefit a lot from. Maybe even some teachers will benefit from that because I know that, Dinur, you mentioned in a recent episode that you procrastinate too.

Dinur: Absolutely.

Adam: I have been known in the past to procrastinate, although I've kind of gotten a handle on that now. So now I teach people how to not do that.

But poor time management is a big issue, because the student doesn't realize that the test is coming up until suddenly it's the day before, maybe even the day of. Now they're trying to cram three weeks or, or even a month's worth of study into 24 hours.

There's a British show called **Red Dwarf** from the 1970s, and they turned it into a book, and there was a character called Rimmer, and he was studying for his astronavigation exam. But Rimmer was a master of procrastination. So he would make a schedule - he had three months to study for this exam, so he would make a schedule. Well, making the schedule, cause he'd make it so intricately and so beautifully and he'd, he'd color code it, and all these things that look like work. Then he would get to week eleven, he'd have a beautiful schedule for three months and it would be one week away from the exam. Then he had to cram eleven weeks of studying into one week, and it never worked, and he failed spectacularly time after time after time after time. Sometimes he had a nervous breakdown during the exam.

And I look at our students who are not planning or if they plan, they are doing it in a, so the book **Red Dwarf**, they said Rimmer really went about "not doing it" in a "doing it" kind of way. Things that look like they're productive, like making a schedule, but he spent so much time on the schedule that he never gets to actually following the schedule. And I've seen students make elaborate lists of things they're going to do and then they just keep adding to the bottom of the list. It never gets done.

So learning how to manage your time is one of the ways that you can learn how to stop cramming. Because if you learn how to say, "I'm going to have a two hour block of time to study four times before the exam," and then you study during those four times, then, then it makes it stick better. It makes it work better.

Dinur: And I wanted to build on that. These are different styles of time management. When students are cramming, they're trying to cram a lot of information into a short amount of time and obviously something might stick surface level, but surface level won't carry them very far. Even on that exam. The different way of looking at their time that they need to look at is doing a little bit, but doing the little bit consistently. Doing a little bit each day and trying to build and build and build, because it's a lot easier to build in small blocks than it is to do anything in one fell swoop.

Adam: Yeah. I have student athletes especially who will start enthusing about this when I talk about how to manage your time for studying, they say, "oh, this is like doing practice." I say, "it's exactly like doing practice. You're practicing for the test, just like you would practice for the game." I have musicians say, "oh, you know, I'm practicing, like I would practice for a concert." And I say "right. Is everything the fun part where you get to play the music over and over, or do you still also have to practice scales and arpeggios, key changes and things like that?" They say, "oh right. There's a lot of that basic stuff that I've got to do in order to prepare for a show. I can't just play the song over and over." I ask the athletes "how many times do you need to practice your layup? How many times do you need to practice a long bomb pass so that you've really got it down?"

I know that, Dinur, for you sports is a big analogy for you. But when I get the student athletes and they say, "oh, studying for a test is like practicing for the game!" Yes, exactly. If you can give

them that bit of a handle on it, sometimes it makes them feel like they understand what they're doing better.

So the next thing that we listed -- and we're still on reasons why students cram - is fear. They're afraid because - and again, this over-focus on exams has really harmed our students, I think, because they see the word "exam," they see even the word "test," and they freeze. They start panicking. They're like, "Oh God, it's a test. It's a test, a high-stakes thing."

We don't help them when we make our classes "three exams and a paper," because then everything is high-stakes. That pushes kids, that pushes students into cramming and cramming and cramming because they're afraid of what will happen if they fail. So if the whole focus is "pass the test in order to pass the class," we need to find better ways to do that. So I'm addressing teachers here, more than students.

As far as students, you've got to learn how to not be afraid of the exam. I know that that sounds really difficult, because when I was an undergrad, I was afraid of exams. And then I realized one day: the exam is just checking to see if I know what they taught me and to see if I studied it and I understand it. So then, I need to make sure that I don't just memorize, but that I understand - that I can explain it. So this involves a change in the way you study.

We're going to talk about that in a later podcast episode, too, but just put that on the shelf, we're going to look at this.

Dinur: Something that I'd like to add from my own experience as an undergrad myself, I absolutely failed some exams, but failing an exam isn't the end of the world. It's not the end of your college career. It doesn't mean you can't do good things. It just means it wasn't your day, it wasn't your test.

Yeah, it's hard to let go of that fear because a lot of the tests you've taken, we're looking at the SAT or the ACT for some students, advanced placement exams, these are all high-stakes exams with big consequences. But even if you don't do well, that's not the end of the world.

So one of the things that the benefit of teaching and the benefit of age has given us is the benefit of perspective. We want our students to give us your best efforts a in day out and on your exams. We want you to study, but really we want you to take something from our classes. If that's you learn how to manage your time better, you develop your writing a little bit better, you start thinking about questions in a different way, then that's what really sticks with us. It's not whether you failed an exam or not. At the end of end of the day, end of the term, I don't remember who passed what exam.

Adam: I have students who have asked me, "well, don't you think less of the students who don't pass?" I say "no, I want to know what got in the way." Because there are students who honestly believe that the teachers that we that were sitting there -- we talked about where the adversary, but they also think that we're sitting there like were a judge and that we're judging them personally, not their work. That's really hard for a lot of students to separate themselves from "I am what I turned in." A lot of students feel like what they or whatever they turned in is them. It's what they did, it's who they are. So seeing an F or a D on an exam feels like a judgment of themselves.

I was a straight A student in grade school, until I found out about math. Then I started bringing home C's. And I felt like I was the worst person in the world, because how dare I not be smart. This goes back to the growth mindset. We've already talked about that some. So the thing about fear is that students need to learn that one exam is one point in time.

But teachers, you also need to really make sure that you are not stressing the students out by making the whole class just the exams. I know it's more work and it's more grading. But if you want your students to learn and not hate you, you have to give them some low-stakes stuff that also allows them to learn. You can't just make it all this exam, that exam, the other exam and a high-stakes paper. If you do that, you're not helping your students, and to the student it really feels like a power play too. You want to avoid that when you can.

Dinur: So one of the things that I do for example, to help my students out, is instead of having the paper be high-stakes, I have them bring in drafts two or three times and I make the drafts to be worth between 5% and 10% each of their grade. That way there's something completely within their control, that doesn't involve me necessarily looking at the quality of the work, because they're using it for a peer review and it gives them that much more control over their grade. I do that because I try and be fair with my students, my students don't know the types of questions that I'm going to ask them on an exam until the first test rolls around. So I'll try and either give them one or two quizzes before the first exam, or I give them these draft assignments, which gives them more control over their grade.

Adam: And you said give them quizzes. So what I do is I use a program called Socrative and I give them readings and videos to watch before they come to class, because I flipped classrooms. We'll probably do an episode on that at some point. But what they have to do is they have to have watch it before they come to class. Then I give them a little five question quiz to find out: do they understand what they read.

Sometimes I'll catch them, like I'll have a question where it will say answer A is partly correct answer B is partly correct and answer C is both of these, and a lot of students will only answer A because they just rushing through the quiz. So I'll call them out on it. I'll say, okay, this is showing me that you guys are not reading the whole question or you are not reading all the answers before you answer your question and you need to do that.

Just yesterday I gave two of my classes a Kahoot! quiz, because there was a terminology-heavy lecture where, since we're early in the term right now - right now we're recording this in February - there's a lot of terms they need to know that they're going to carry with them throughout the class. When I had a student say, "well, why, why are you doing this, why are you doing this quiz?" I said, "well, because this way you can look at your results and see what you didn't know and then you know what you need to study. But you also get a sense of how I ask questions."

This is sort of like a preview, because the quiz questions that I put on the Kahoot! quiz, the quiz questions that I put in the Socrative quizzes, they're in the quiz banks for the module quiz on this module. I try to give my students these low-stakes, you know, "the only thing you're getting graded for is whether you're here or not," you either got it complete or you didn't because you were here or you weren't. I don't grade you on how many you missed, just "were you here." That's the in-class activity for the day and that allows them that low-stakes.

So we've talked a lot about fear and changing the stakes. Another thing that I think is interesting is that there is a difference of goals. When we give exams, we are expecting you to show us that you have learned the material. But when students go for exams, their goal is just to pass it. So what does passing the exam mean? Well, it just means being able to spit up all the answers that you have carried around in your head that you crammed in, and that doesn't show us that you learned anything.

So one of the ways that we can sort of move students toward the idea that "you have to show that you understand, not just that you've memorized" is make the questions a little less "here's the definition, pick out a term from the list." What I do is I give a situation and I say, okay, which of these terms is reflected so that the student has to do a little bit of thinking. It's not just spit it back, spit it back, spit it back. Those are the ones that the students always say, well those are really hard exams. But if you let them know ahead of time, "these are the kinds of questions you're going to get, it's not memorization anymore" - then at least they have the knowledge going in so they can control their outcomes a little better.

Dinur: One of the things that I do is I allow my students to take their exams online. They can take them at home. I make them open book and open note. I talked to my intro students yesterday because they have an exam coming up in a few weeks, and I said the tests are open book, open note, same with the quizzes and I had a student go, "really?" I told him, "yes, I want to see your best shot on that test. I will give you those tools that you can use but you need to know your stuff because there is a time limit and you're not going to have enough time to go through everything we've learned and answer these questions well --"

Adam: Unless you actually studied for it.

Dinur: Exactly. The look of shock that I got was pretty priceless. But we had just talked about fear, and Adam had talked about how there's this perception that teachers are "out to get" students. We're not. I can speak at least for Adam and for myself, when we teach, we really want to see how well you're learning. We don't care if you have a perfect quiz, not that we think less of you by any chance. But our reflection of you or our opinions of you don't depend on your grade.

Adam: You put in the notes here "mundanity of excellence."

Dinur: Yeah, so there was an article written, a researcher was looking at Olympic swimmers and he was looking to see what really set them apart. How are they so good compared to their peers? One of the things he found was that to be excellent at something, it means you're consistently putting in a little effort each day.

These swimmers were in the pool. They're in the weight room, they're with their nutritionist, but they're doing just a little bit each day. It wasn't that the Olympics were four years away, they're going to wait for three years and then get in shape. They're getting in shape four years out, and trying to work a little bit each day and doing that little bit each day had a cumulative or an additive effect where all of a sudden they're amazing, they're world class athletes.

Similar to our students, cramming isn't going to get you to be a Rhodes Scholar. What it's gonna do is it's going to give you enough surface knowledge to maybe answer a few questions here and there on a test. But we want that excellence to be developed from you. For that, on your part, it means taking that time and that effort and doing a little bit consistently, whether that means literally every day or every other day. On our part, it's on us to try and teach that message and to give you opportunities to demonstrate that, whether that's quizzes, whether that's small papers, whether that's group projects or big discussions in class.

Adam: Then the last thing is, again, this kind of goes back to the difference of goals, but memorizing versus analyzing and versus creating. On an exam you can't really synthesize and create much unless you have an essay exam. But the thing is that memorizing is what you do in high school. Memorizing is what you do in middle school. But when you get into the college level or even the college prep level, you need to start focusing on "How do I apply this? How do I analyze this? How can I use this?" Not just "do I know the word." That's really a difficult shift for some students to make.

So we've talked about a lot of the reasons why students cram. So now how do we guide them away from this? We talked about how my student athletes and some of my musician students have said, "oh duh, this is practice." I think you were actually the one who said a musician doesn't learn to create or play a song overnight. Athletes have to practice for hours and hours and hours.

Dinur: Absolutely. We can also provide study guides and I know that there's debate among teachers if it's too much like high school to do that. I myself like to offer my students study guides about a week to week and a half before the exams. But I made my study guides a little bit broader than I do my exams because I want my students to really work with the material. I don't want to guide them to specific questions on the test.

Adam: We need to reduce the number of high-stakes exams or high-stakes assignments in some ways to do that. Or you can reduce how many exams you give you, you can reduce the weight of the exams, you can allow them to retake the exam.

So I let them take their exams online and if they blow it, they get a second chance. Now they get a random set of questions from quiz bank. So it won't be the same exact test, but it will be the same material. I make them wait a week before they can do the retake. I've had them say, "well, why can't I just retake it immediately?" Because if you had studied, you would have passed the first one. So I want you to take that time to study.

You can also reward improvement as well as rewarding great scores. So if they go from a D to a C, praise them, let them know that's really good improvement. Look, you jumped a whole grade up. That's good. What are you doing differently? Keep doing that. Making study plans. Maybe you don't make a study plan for your students, like I don't, but I give them time to make their own. There's a format that I use with my, with my coaching clients and it goes like this where they make their own.

So what class is this exam in?

What format is it in? Because if you're going to study for an exam, you need to know is it multiple choice or true false or is an essay, is it short answer? Are you going to need to fill in the blank? Are you going to need to know how to spell something? That would change the format.

Is your teacher going to provide a study guide or not? In my classes the answer is no. But they're creating their own study guide here.

Then I ask them, okay, what materials do you need to prepare for the exams? That's like their books, their notes, if they've made flashcards, if they've got notes from study sessions with their study group, whatever.

Then I ask what study tools will you create to prepare for this exam? So this includes things like flashcards or self quizzes or a plan to teach it to their parents so that they've had the chance to go over the material with someone else.

Then I ask them how they'll use that study tool or the study tools. Like, when are you going to use them? How are you going to use them? When will you use them? This makes them put down the dates they're actually going to study.

Then I think the most important thing, and this is a question we should be asking our students, how will you know that you're ready for the exam? So I had one student say, "well, I've got 1000 flashcards." It was a cumulative final. And they said, "I've got 1000 flashcards. So when I can get through 900 of them without any mistakes, I will be ready for the exam. They took them in groups of like 50, and they said, so when I can get through 45 on a given day, then I can do the next day and then the next day. When I can get through all of them, I'm ready for the exam." They consistently scored 80s and 90s on their exams.

So you could create a form like this. I have it on Google Docs and on Google Forms and I've basically put it on all of my learning management systems pages for my students: Here's your study form. Go make your study guide.

Then you can help students fill it out and commit to studying. You can remind them of that. I've started sending out text messages saying, "hey, have you made your study guide yet?" When I give them a tool that isn't necessarily content, like I gave them the to do list as a time management plan - I've noticed that my students are starting to get stressed out again. It's week four. So I sent out a text at the beginning of the week saying, "hey, when's the last time you made a to do list to get all that stuff out of your head where you can deal with it?" I had like twelve students say to me in class yesterday, "I'm so glad you sent that text out cause I'd forgotten that tool." I'm like, okay.

So remind the students. So you could say "hey, go fill out the study guide form on Google Docs." You can set this up so that it will email them their plan and then you'll also have a copy of it in the responses, so you can look at what the students are doing. You might even be able to say, "Hey, John, it looks like you're trying to make four study tools. Maybe you don't need that many. Maybe you just really need to focus on flashcards and self quizzes or something like that."

Dinur: One thing that I recommend for my students is to study in small groups and to study in person. I've told my students obviously their tests are open book, open notes. So if they Google Doc it, I don't consider it cheating. But I tell them that it's a really, really bad idea to do that. Students go, well why? And I told them, well look, if you're studying in small groups in person and someone makes a mistake or isn't sure about the material or maybe someone else in that small group really knows it, it was something that stuck with them and they can teach them on the spot. That way no one loses face. No one's going to be like, I can't believe you don't remember this theory. So you get corrected, no points lost. If no one in the group is sure, or if there's a disagreement, students can email me.

But if they do a Google doc and someone makes a mistake, whether intentionally or not and no one catches are correct, sit on the Google doc then everyone who looks at the Google doc makes the same mistake.

Adam: One of the things, I also tell them this, when I did the Kahoot! quiz yesterday, I told them, I want you to get together with your classmates and look at what you missed that they didn't, and what they missed that you didn't, and give advice to each other about, okay, how do you remember that term? Share your mnemonics, share your study tricks, share your remembering - your tricks for how to remember this thing. I had so much chatter across the class while they were working on it, 'cause I had students say, "oh no, when I looked at that I knew that I could use it this way and then I'll remember it," and all the other students in their row went "oohhh!"

So they created mini-study groups during class, and then I started telling them, "so you see how well this worked? Now do that outside of class."

So give them the chance to do something that feels like a study group in the class period and then tell them, okay, "exchange contact information with the people you worked with and work with them outside of class, create a study group." Then ask them every week. So have you met with your study groups? How's that going? You might even give credit for study groups.

Then we can just finish up real quick here. How students can apply this. Create a steady plan. You can go back and listen to this podcast and write down the steps for the study plan. We'll put that in the notes as well, that'll be in the show notes.

Remember, too, that any time you interact with class material, you're studying. It doesn't matter how you're interacting with it. Studying does not just mean reading the book and then reading the book again and then reading the book again. It means reading the book and then rewriting your notes in different ways and making flashcards. That's studying. Making flash cards is studying, using the flash cards is studying, creating a self-quiz, that's studying; interacting with your study group, that's studying; sitting your parents down and saying, mom and dad, I need to teach you this, that's studying - as long as you're interacting with the material,

Dinur: Trying to apply this material to your daily life. If you're learning about theories, for example, if you're learning about anomie, for example, try and make up a story as you're going through your day and teach yourself the concept that way. Like Adam said, learning isn't just reading through the terms. It's not just reading through the book. It's really engaging with it. Even by creating these fake scenarios, as long as you're trying to engage each with the actual

material that's going to stick with you, it might be an unusual way, but you know what? Weird works.

Adam: One other thing that I just thought of too, teachers, if you want your students to slow down, providing them assignments that double as study tools is amazingly good. So worksheets. One of the extra credit assignments that I give my students, they don't have to do it, but they can, "here's a list of all the terms and concepts. You define them and turn it in." Then you either get credit, it's either credit, no credit. But then I can also say, okay, "your definition for anomie is totally wrong. Go look at this section of the book or go look on this page or go rewatch this part of this lecture to understand anomie. If you still don't get it, you need to come and talk to me."

Because then they've got a list of all the terms and concepts and they can use that as a study tool. So think about the assignments that you give, the low-stakes assignments and see how many of them you can turn into study tools. You could tell them, "write a quiz on the material in this chapter. Write ten multiple choice or true false questions on the material in this chapter."

Or you could have them create flashcards and either not turn their flashcards in, but maybe like send you a photo of their flashcards in email or through the learning management system, so that you can give them credit for doing the work they need to do. The goal is not to make them do more work. The goal is to make them do effective work.

So if you set it up that way, they'll be a lot more successful, and that means your classes will be a lot more successful, which means you will feel a more successful teacher

Dinur: For students, as counterintuitive as it sounds, this will hopefully help reduce your stress.

Adam: Yeah, and we aren't trying to stress you out, but sometimes having to learn something that is totally new, like not cramming, feels stressful because it's new. So allow it to stop being new. Give yourself some time to let it stop being new.

The last thing for students is, remember you can't learn if you only take one pass through the material. You've got to do it a couple of times, and you've really got to do it in different ways because if you only do it in one way, there's stuff that's not going to come in, there's stuff that's not going to stick no matter how much you try to force it, because that's just not how our brains work.

So that's it for episode 4, and in episode 5 we will be talking about the growth mindset and the OLI method. So come back and see us for that next week.

[Theme 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: We look forward to seeing you next week.

[Music Fades]