



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

Episode 8 - Improvement, Not Perfection

[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.

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier! This is episode 8. And in episode 8, we're going to talk about how to focus on improvement and not perfection. A lot of students have a black-and-white view of success: you're either an A student, which means "perfect," or you're a failure. So in this episode, we're going to talk about how to shift your goals away from perfection and towards improvement.

Now, we seek perfection. Human beings want to seek perfection. But why do we do it? And how are we socialized to believe that it's necessary or even possible? What causes this?

And I want to start by saying this is our third attempt at recording this episode, and that means that we are not perfect. We have already dealt with the fact that we must, once again, record Episode 8, because we had computer crashes and internet flaws and all kinds of things that have basically destroyed our first two recordings.

But we are still socialized to believe that perfection is necessary - that we should be able to do it in one shot: do it right, get it done, get it out of the way. So what causes this? So we're going to talk about that.

Dinur: Right, and one of the big causes that Adam and I think causes students to seek perfection is just the sheer emphasis and repetition of standardized testing that they've gone through in their K-12 education. No Child Left Behind Act sounded nice, but effectively it meant teachers were teaching students how to take multiple choice exams, because there was funding and jobs on the line for them. So they had a vested interest in making sure students did well, but the development was focused on test-taking and doing well on a specific exam, rather than developing skills that could be applied after school was over.

Adam: And I think that's an important point right there, is that the skill that was being taught wasn't "how to learn." It was "how to take a test." And if you practice something, whatever it is, whether it's negative or positive, you're going to get really good at that thing.

Most of the students come into college thinking that taking a test is what measures their worth, It's what measures their abilities. And all it really does is measure their ability to take tests.

And this leads us to the myth of the "A student," meaning the student who is perfect and never has to work hard.

Dinur: We've all had students where they were given good grades in high school and in junior high, and they could get away with doing work at the last minute. And they come to college, they think these patterns can continue. And all of a sudden, they're not getting A's. And we worry that the message isn't "OK, these are study habits that need to change." Instead it gets internalized as "Well if all of a sudden I'm not getting the same grade with the same effort that I was (or wasn't) putting in in high school, then all it is saying is I'm dumb."

And that's a very dangerous thought, because you don't want students to assume they're dumb. You want students to say, "OK, I didn't do well this time, how do I improve, how do I grow?" Rather than feeling like failing on the first try means failing overall.

Adam: And the thing is that this conditions the students who consider themselves A students - meaning the ones who pass all the tests with high scores - it really develops a fixed mindset in the worst way, where they say, "if I don't do it right every time, than something's wrong with me. If it suddenly begins to take effort, if it's harder than I thought it should be, then I must suddenly be getting stupider," and that is not the case! But so many of these students believe that the only way to be smart is to be perfect - and that's a really fixed mindset.

Now we've talked about the fixed mindset in past episodes, when we talked about learning the OLI method - that's part of getting out of the fixed mindset - and Dinur actually suggested that we change the name of episode 9, which is going to talk about different ways to think about failure and different least think about learning to how to develop a growth mindset. But I think that, actually, this one could almost be retitled "how to develop your growth mindset," because the fixed mindset, as Dinur pointed out, says "I'm either good at it or I'm not good at it," and the growth mindset says "I'm not good at it now, but I can work on it, I can improve, I can get better over time." And so I'll talk about the fixed mindset because I have, and I still, work hard to work on this.

I was a gifted child when I was a kid in the 70's and in the 70's they assumed that if you were gifted in this area, then it was holistic, that it applied to all areas. And so they moved me ahead in the middle of second grade, and suddenly I was in a third grade classroom and I was completely out of my depth in math. I had never learned the times table - I think I've mentioned this before - and from that point on I thought that I was stupid.

I was smart in everything else, but not in math. In math I would pull C's, sometimes I would pull D's, because I didn't have the foundational ideas. And it was devastating for me, and I spent my entire life pretty much believing that I was just stupid at math, and then I found out, "oh, wait, there's this foundational thing called the multiplication table that no one ever taught me."

But I spent years and years believing that I was dumb, because I didn't know how to do math. I'm still not great at math, but I no longer feel terrified when I'm confronted with a math problem. I

know, for one thing, the teachers in the 70's and 80's were wrong when they said "you'll never have a calculator with you." I'm sorry; I have my smartphone, and it has a calculator. And when it comes to higher math, I'm actually pretty good at it. I'm just not good at arithmetic because I was skipped over that time period.

But in the same way the student who finds math easy but finds reading difficult, they may think that they're stupid in reading, when really, all it is is they need to practice more.

And remember, whatever we practice, we get good at. Well, if you're good at math and you're going to play a lot of math puzzles, you're going to do a lot of math problems because they're easy. But if you're not good at reading, you're going to avoid it, because it's not easy for you. Right? So you're not practicing reading.

Dinur: Right, you don't get that same dopamine or serotonin rush doing something that's difficult, because you feel that struggle. Whereas you do something that's easy, it makes it fun for you. You get a high out of it because it's something that you enjoy.

Adam: And you might also get praised for it by the people who are looking at your performance, like your teachers, like your parents.

So the fixed mindset - and it's not hard to install a fixed mindset, either, and we've already talked about how Carol Dweck's graduate students managed to install it in second graders in just one sentence - so if you have a fixed mindset, and students, most of you do, because you were raised in the No Child Left Behind environment that really installed that, you're going to have to embrace the idea that improvement is now the goal. Not being perfect, but being better today than you were yesterday, even if it's only a one percent improvement - that's still improvement, and that's the thing you got to focus on.

And teachers, you also have to focus on improvement and point it out because a lot of students do not see that they're improving, they're only seeing that they're not perfect yet.

Dinur: And one thing that I'd like to draw a parallel to is psychologists say there's a difference between being happy and being fulfilled. It's 2 different mindsets. Being happy is a very temporary condition, whereas being fulfilled is a much longer term range of emotions. It might be less intense but it's a deeper-seated feeling. I'm drawing the parallel to the fixed mindset versus the growth mindset. The fixed mindset is something that says "I'm good or I'm not," "I'm happy or I'm not." The growth mindset, because you're focusing on improvement incrementally, just bit by little bit by little bit, is a lot more like being fulfilled, because it's a lengthier process, but when you look back and you go "OK, I used to be down here and now I'm a little bit better," there's a much deeper-seated feeling and satisfaction.

Adam: So how do we, then, focus on improvement? And this is something I've had students ask me. They say "how am I supposed to focus on improvement? All I see is that I got a D on my test, I got a B on my test, it wasn't an A, it wasn't good enough."

So how do we change this view? And I will say that, based on my Rate My Professor ratings, there's a lot of students who just do not get it. When I give them the chance to improve, they see it as me demanding perfection, and so now I've made a point of saying it in the beginning of my

classes, beginning of the semester, saying “I am not demanding perfection, but you might be.”

And so it will feel like I'm demanding perfection, because your only frame for this is, “if I'm not good enough yet then I'm a failure,” even though “good enough” might be - you might be at a C-plus! That's pretty good! A B-minus! That's actually not bad! But there are students who see anything below A as failure. And so, those are the students who tend to say “He expects you to be perfect!”

No, you're expecting yourself to be perfect, and you're projecting that on - I'm offering you a chance to improve.

So we really need to tease out the difference between aiming for perfect and aiming for improvement, because they're not the same.

Dinur: And one thing that we need to do as instructors is, we need to emphasize first to the student that we're looking for improvement. We're looking for upward trends. We're not looking to see who can pull an A across the board. If a student does that, that's fantastic, but a lot of students need to work and work and work, every student really needs to. But we need to reward that improvement. If you see a student going from a C to a C-plus or a B-minus, all the way up to a B-minus or a B, that's one hell of a trend! That needs to be rewarded, because clearly that student is working on being better.

For students, the way you have to look at it is “do I know or do I understand this?” or “can I talk about this a little bit more today than I was able to yesterday?” “Is this something that's new to me, and now, all of a sudden, it seems a little bit familiar if I come across it in a different class?”

Adam: Another thing is the idea of small victories and small improvement. A lot of students only see the paper, they don't see all the steps that go into it. They only see the project, not all the pieces of the project. They only see the exam not the steps you take to prepare for it.

And one of the ways to bring your attention to the small moments, the small improvements, is to find some physical way to do it. And now, this may sound really hokey, but I've used this with students and with clients: Make a punch card.

So you know how you'll go to a coffee place or a yogurt place or whatever, and they've got a punch card. You know, you're a regular customer and every time you come in, they punch one of the numbers out. And when you punch out 9, you get your 10th coffee or yogurt or whatever for free. Well, so do something like this. Get index cards, the kind that you would use for flash cards, just basic 3x5 cards.

Write what your reward's going to be on it, like “a frappuccino,” or “I get to watch a new movie,” or “I get to play 2 hours of video games,” or whatever reward you want to give yourself. And then, around the edge of it, write the numbers 1 through 10. And then, every time you finish a 2 hour study session, punch off one of those spots. Punch off the 1, punch off the 2...

Dinur mentioned dopamine earlier. You will get a little dopamine hit just by going “click-click” with the punch maker. And the other thing is that you can not just use that card one time for your frappuccino, but you might say, “OK, I'm going to give myself a frappuccino after doing 20 hours

of study, or 10 steps towards this paper. When I finish this thing, I'm going to punch it off, when I finish that thing -" so identify the steps, and then save up the cards.

I have a client whose parents promised him a bike if he got through 20 cards that were 10 hours each, which is basically 200 hours of studying. So he can earn that bicycle that he wants. He's got about 3 cards left. And he's been doing this since last fall, so probably by the end of the spring, he'll have done 200 hours studying. He'll have his bike, but he'll also have 200 hours of studying. And for each card finished, they, like, take him out for ice cream or something. So he's got a small reward on the card for 10 hours of studying, and then after he's done 20 cards he gets a bicycle.

So you could also do this for yourself, you know. When you've done 20 cards of 2 hour blocks of studying, which for you would be then 400 hours of studying, then maybe you get to go on a weekend to the amusement park. You know, if you live near Disneyland, or if you live near a Six Flags, you know - you get to go to the amusement park. That's your big reward for having done all that work.

But allowing yourself to have small rewards draws your attention to your improvement. And that's really, really important, because we don't pay attention to those little steps.

Dinur: And we're very heavily motivated by rewards. Rewards make us feel good. It's natural to want that. And so, if you can make yourself feel good, you're going to be more willing to go through something unpleasant. No one's pretending that these 200 study hours are amazingly fun. They probably aren't! But if you have these small rewards built in, it gives you a milestone to work towards. It gives you something you can say, "OK, I'm a little bit further along today than I was yesterday, and I'm closer to getting this thing that I really, really want."

Adam: The bicycle, or the trip to Disneyland, or whatever. Another thing, and this is something that we're going to talk about more in Episode 9, our next episode, is learning how to be realistic. What do we actually have control over? What don't we have control over? And the list of things that we actually can control as individuals? It's pretty short. We can control what we do, how we respond, and what we choose to think about a situation. Those are the only things that we have control over: what we choose to think about, how we respond and what we do. That's it.

Everything else is outside of our control. We can't control what other people do. We can't control other people's responses or reactions. We can't control how other people think about us. One of the biggest lessons I've had to learn is, what other people think about me is none of my business. They're going to be people who hate me, there are people who hate me - just go look at Rate My Professors. There are students who can't stand me, because I expect them to work. But there are also students who love me, because I made them work, and they realized how much more they could do. There are people who probably don't like me because they're the parents of the kids who hate me.

The point is, I can't worry about that, because if I worry about "what will they think of me," then I'm not focusing on what I need to get done.

So be aware that the things you have control over are what you think, what you do, and how you respond, and everything else is outside your control.

Dinur: And for students, this means that you can't control what grades you get, but what that does mean is that if you have the opportunity to get feedback throughout the semester, whether it's on a paper or through quizzes or through exams, and you're not at the level that you would like to be at, that's a chance for you to grow and see what you need to take, what steps you need to take to bridge that gap between where you currently are and where you want to be. So you can't control the grade that may be given to you. You can control how you respond, how you build, and how you improve.

Adam: I don't know that I would agree with that. I would say you can control the grade, but you have to control all the other things first. If you go into an exam thinking, "I'm not going to pass," you're controlling your grade in that you're probably not going to pass. Because if you're thinking about it as "I am not going to be able to do this," if you react to an exam, or to - rather, to an assignment, like putting it off until the last minute, if that's how you're responding, you're not going to do well.

But if you control these things about what you think about, or how you think about it, how you respond to how you're thinking about it, and then doing the things you need to do, all of which are in your control, you can probably control at least some of your grade.

Now, you can't control what the teacher thinks of you, but you can control the work you do to get to the grade. Now if you didn't do it well, or if you didn't do it right, you can also control how you respond to that information when you get back your exam or your assignment with a C or D on it, you can say, "OK, how do I improve?" and then we go back and that brings us right into the OLI] method which we talked about in depth in Episode 5.

Dinur: Right, and the OLI method was observe, learn, and improve. Well, we're focusing heavily on the learning and on the improving. And one thing that we can do is learning to accept that there's always room for improvement. No one, no one is perfect, right? There's no such thing as a perfect student. There's no such thing as a perfect teacher.

However, there are effective teachers, and effective students, and these are students who learn there is always more to learn. There's always room to grow. There's always something that you can do just slightly better today than you did yesterday, whether that means a little bit more time reading, a little bit more time writing, looking up new sources.

Adam: And I also want to bring in that it's not just that there are no perfect students or perfect teachers, there's no perfect assignments. Teachers, there's going to be a mistake in the assignment that you gave the students. You're going to find a place where the wording in the instructions was not clear. Then accept that.

Model being able to improve by showing the students: "OK, so Step Four, a lot of people said 'I don't understand it.' So let's go into how we can explain it. This is what I want to see. Help me write this better. Help me figure it out."

Toss it to the students. Say, "how would you explain this to a friend so that it made sense? Because this is what I want in step 4."

All right? If you are a student, even your third draft of your paper will not be perfect. There will

always be something you can improve. I noticed, in my dissertation, that I had said “this is on the left hand side of the model,” and it wasn’t, it was on the right hand side of the model. And all 4 of the people who read the dissertation, who graded it to give me my doctorate degree, missed it - and so did I. And now that’s out there on ProQuest. It’s permanent! There is nothing I can do about it!

So there will always be room for improvement. There will always be things you can do to improve. There is no such thing as a perfect anything.

Dinur talked about, find ways to make those small improvements, so here's a couple of other ways besides the OLI method.

Make a list of one percent improvements you can make to your work. So if, you know, let's take writing, because writing is always the thing that students stress out about. If you know that you have a love affair with the comma, if you know that run-on sentences are something you always get dinged for by your teachers, then it is on you to go through your draft and look at every single comma, every single semi-colon, every single dash, and make sure that those shouldn't actually be a period, a question mark or an exclamation point.

If you know that you love the words “thus” and “therefore” ad “however” and “obviously,” and all those other wonderful little fluffy words that add color, and you're starting every second sentence with one of them, then it's time to go through your paper and say, “I can have one of these words - only one! - every 5 pages, that's it.” And that may mean that you wind up putting one “thus” in a 7-page paper and you don't get to have any “therefores,” you don't get how any “however,” and that's the way it is - but it improves the paper. That's a one percent improvement. If you make 10 of this kinds of improvements to your work, you improve your paper by 10 percent. That's improvement.

Another way to do it is to failure-plan how you will avoid making mistakes. So imagine the worst, “I failed this paper, how did I do that?” So make a list of all the reasons that you failed. Now address each one. Say, “OK, so, I didn't read 10 resources, I only read two.” So what's the solution? Read 10 resources.

But plan this out, imagine that your paper is due in 6 weeks - that you failed it. All right, how do you fix that? Think about the different ways that you failed, and then fix that.

And I got this from a fellow who talked about failure-planning for going on whitewater rafting for the first time. And he said, “What are all the different things that could go wrong? Well, let's see. I could fall out of the boat and drown. OK, so how are you going to avoid that? Wear my life vest.”

“All right, how else are you going to learn how to avoid that? I'm going to learn how to fall out of the boat. You know, so there's a certain way that, if you fall off the boat, you're supposed to pull yourself into a ball, so that you're less likely to say break your leg or break your arm. If you're pulled into a ball, there's less of you to hit the rocks.”

“I'm afraid that I'm going to drown.” OK, well again, life vest.

“I'm afraid that I'm going to make an idiot of myself, because I don't know how to do what they're

telling me to do." OK, well, then I need to read up or watch videos about it, say how to aim the boat at the tongue of water that always goes down the middle of a rapid.

And he failure-planned it so well that the people who were on his first whitewater rafting trip thought he was an expert, because he planned it out. He'd identified all the places he could fail, and figured out how to fix that before it happened.

So you could do this with a project too. Like, if you know that there are certain areas of your projects that you just don't do well on, then failure-plan for it. Make sure that you've got a plan in place to say, "if this happens, this is what I will do to make that less bad or keep it from happening in the first place."

Dinur: And one way you know you can remind yourself to focus on improvement, rather than perfection, is write something on your wall or put something on the door and that something needs to say, Practice Makes Proficient.

You want to encourage a positive mindset, but you also don't want the focus to be on the idea of perfection. You want to improve on being competent, and then being better than competent. And that means that you're showing how you can write better, your showing how you can analyze better, you're showing how you can really take the tools that you're being given in these classes that you're taking, and this material that you're exposed to, and how do you make sense of it.

And the reason I'm also emphasizing that, Adam and I, rather, are emphasizing proficiency, is to bring it in from sports: the best quarterbacks in the NFL and in college, they've thrown interceptions, some of them have cost them games. The best pitchers in baseball allowed runs, sometimes at really, really bad times. In hockey and soccer the best goalies in the world give up some awful, awful goals.

But that doesn't mean that they're terrible, even though none of them are perfect. What they did is they said, "OK, this was a bad game. This was a bad throw or a bad pitch. This was a bad goal that I allowed. What can I do to be better?"

The focus was on them improving, and by focusing on that, that allowed them to grow and become great at what they did. They showed that they could take a moment of incompetence, learn from it, and become both professional and masterful at their positions.

And one thing that I really, really, really like to emphasize to my students, when they do assignments for me, is essentially if they were as good today at anything, whether that's writing a paper, reading, doing art, playing music or playing sports, if they were at the top of their game today and they couldn't improve, what would be the point of tomorrow? And that stuns a lot of them, But because there's always room to grow, that means tomorrow has meaning.

And one of the things that I can speak to from my own experience is, some of the students that I remember the most, and sometimes the most fondly, aren't my A students and that's not a knock against them. But I've had students who really, really struggled early on in my courses, but they worked hard at getting better and improving, and I could see that and that really stood out to me. And when I had to write a letter of recommendation, I could say, "they may have struggled initially, but they put so much effort in that I see them doing really, really well in whatever it is,"

whether it's for school or whether for its for a job or for an internship.

So even as a teacher I'm not necessarily looking for who gets a 100 percent, I'm looking to see who can learn and who can improve.

Adam: And I think it was interesting, you know, you had a methods professor who said that he never assigned 100 percent on anything.

Dinur: Yeah, absolutely. This is a shout out to one of my former professors, Wes Yaltz, I remember taking him from a methods course in graduate school. And on his exams, he told us, "you will never, ever, ever get 100 percent in my class. I think the highest rate I give is 70 or 75 percent."

And you have a room full of students who've done really, really well as undergrads, and that throws everyone off. And he goes, "you can never know absolutely everything there is to know about research methods, but you're showing me that you're trying to learn more and more about methods and you're trying to be better at them than you were at the beginning of the semester."

Adam: Here's some ways that teachers can use this when they talk to their students. And the first one is that you need to really emphasize that perfection is neither necessary nor expected, and emphasize that if you don't make mistakes, you're not learning. So you expect your students to make mistakes and if they don't make mistakes then you know they're not learning. Even if they're getting 90 percent on the exams, that doesn't mean that they're learning. They've got to show you that they're willing to make mistakes and learn from them, because that is going to help them not just in college, but after college, when they get to a job.

I mean, for example at my first job that I had - and I was not in college for very long, I had dropped out and I went back in my late 20's, when my brain had settled down - but I got a job. and I made a mistake. and I was convinced they were going to fire me. And it wasn't that big of a mistake. It wasn't a huge mistake, you know. The boss called me and he was screaming how it was going to be a \$10,000 fix. Well, but this is a housing company that makes millions of dollars a year. \$10,000 is not that big of a deal, you know? It's not that much money when you compare that to the hundreds of millions of dollars that they're making every year.

And I was totally convinced that I was would lose my job.

And he said, "No, I just want you to make sure that you don't make this mistake again."

And I never did. It was just a missed change on a work order from a building site, but I was so afraid of making mistakes that I thought that I was going to lose my job.

So if you can tell your students, if you can get them to understand that mistakes are a necessary part of any job, that they're a necessary part of any task, any assignment, and teach them how to chill out when they make a mistake. Teach them how to take a breath and say, "OK, what can I learn from this mistake?" that they will do better, and they'll be calmer. And anxiety is a huge issue with college right now. So you've got to emphasize that, if you don't make mistakes in my class, you're not learning - so I expect you to make mistakes.

Dinur: And we know that messages are both spoken and unspoken. And so the spoken message

has to be followed up with concrete action. So I mentioned that I tend to look for upward trends across the term for my students. If they're doing a little bit better on their quizzes or on their tests, or I see them really working on their papers, and they're borderline between two grades - well, if I see that upward trend I give them that nod up, because I want to reward the fact that they've been improving.

And the way I look at it is that student has earned the benefit of the doubt for me, because they focused on a big, long-term picture goal, and they worked towards it. I want to reward that.

Adam: And one way to bring students' attention to mistakes not being the end of the world, and mistakes being learning opportunities, I will ask my students every now and then, I'll say, "What was your best mistake? Was what was the mistake, and what did you learn from the mistake?"

And I get all kinds of responses. I had one student say to me, "Well, my best mistake this week for me was actually forgetting my pencil pouch, because I've also forgotten other more important things, like papers I needed to turn in, and so that told me that I needed to find a better way to organize my stuff." Hey, that's great, right? They talked about getting an organizer, where they could keep stuff that was due in one place, and stuff that was being worked on in another place - and all of that was just forgetting a pencil pouch.

I had another student say that their best mistake of the week was accepting an extra shift at work, and they realized they can't do that during finals week, because they've got to study for their finals. So they've got to turn down extra shifts at work, because they need to have that time to focus on their studying. And so they said they've talked to their boss and they said "boss there are going to be about for weeks every year where I am not going to be able to accept extra shifts, and I may need to actually even have other people take my shifts and that's during midterms and finals." And their boss said, "I don't like it, but OK." So they also learned how to talk to a boss about something difficult.

Notice that there could be a ripple effect of a mistake once you've learned how to also fix that mistake. It also provides solutions for other problems, so remember, your mistakes could lead to great things. There are companies that say, "Give us your best mistake of the quarter. What did it do for the company? How did it help our bottom line? How did it fix our problem that we didn't know we had?" And you need to be OK with that.

Dinur: And for students, you really, really need to learn and to work on controlling what you can. You know, like Adam said, we can't control a lot of things. We can control very, very few. But what we can control, we can improve on, and we can grow on, and we can be better today than we were yesterday, and we can be better tomorrow than where we are today. So the idea is always just to climb up and build and build and build, bit by bit by bit.

So this really dovetails nicely with next week's episode, Episode 9, which is all about how to change your thinking. Adam and I are going to go and give tips to help you develop the growth mindset, and how to get out of that fixed mindset.

And we'll see you again --

Adam: -- 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.

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