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

Learning Made Easier

Episode 12: Making Time Noticeable

[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 12, and the first episode in our time management series. Today, we're going to talk about how to make time noticeable.

Dinur: Time management is one of the biggest stressors that college students face. The only time this isn't true is if you're one of those born-organized people who "just know" how to manage your time without having to think about it.

If this is you, you're in the minority. Only about 13% of students surveyed in a recent student engagement and insights survey through Cengage Learning said they didn't worry about time management or struggle with it. All of 13% don't worry or struggle with it! That means 87% of the students said they do!

So in this series, we're going to talk to that 87% of students. The next six episodes of our podcast will be about different time management strategies. In this episode, we're doing a deep dive into the first strategy of time management, making time noticeable. What does it mean to make 10 noticeable? Well, let's first begin with the situation where time isn't noticeable.

Adam: So, let's say today is Saturday, and you've got a five-page paper do two weeks from now on Friday. Two weeks sounds like so much time!

So you promise yourself you'll get it done - starting next week. Next week will be the week you focus on this paper and knock it out of the park. You have too much to do this week already.

So, you go through the first week and, sure, there's a couple of hours here and there that you had free that you could have spent using on the beginning of your paper. But you've got next week, right? No problem, no sweat - next week. That's when you said you'd do it, that's when it's going to get done.

Then, next week arrives, and it's Saturday again, and the paper's due this coming Friday. Maybe you begin to feel a little nibble of panic, or maybe you don't. But in any case, hey, you know, it's still not due till the end of the week, right? So, we can put it off until Wednesday or so, because we have other things we need to do on Sunday or Monday or Tuesday.

Dinur: But then Wednesday comes, and you have 48 hours left to get the paper done. But your best friend is having a crisis, or there's a game on Wednesday night, or something comes up. But you'll get it done, you have all day tomorrow, right?

Now, it's Thursday morning, which leads into Thursday night. The paper's due tomorrow. Where did all your time go? Why didn't you plan better? Why didn't you do it sooner? You're kicking yourself with these thoughts and others as you run to the campus computer lab and begin hammering out the paper, starting at 9 pm, with a few Monster drinks in your backpack to get you through the six-hour ordeal that you're facing.

Adam: So, are you ready to stop having these ordeals?

Because when I give this little speech to my students in class, they all start nodding. Yeah, they know what this is like, and you do too.

So then it's time to make time noticeable. And the first way to do this is with the very humble to-do list. To-do lists accomplish one thing, pretty much, and they accomplish it really, really well. They force you to look at the things you need to do, instead of just thinking about the things that you need to do.

A lot of students think they're going to remember everything they need to do. But what happens is what we've just described in the five-page paper ordeal. It's not in front of them, so they don't realize how close that due date is getting. Not only that, it's jumbled up in your head with the 10 or 15 or 50 other things you've also got to get done in the next few weeks.

Dinur: A to-do list takes care of both of these problems. It puts what you have to do where you can look at it. And it gets these activities out of your head so that you can

free up that space for thinking, planning and other activities that help you a lot more than trying to hold your schedule in your head ever can.

Take a piece of notebook paper out, divide it into three columns, two narrow ones, maybe an inch wide on the left, and a big one that takes up about two-thirds of the page to the right. In the show notes, there are PDFs showing each step of this process. And you can download these examples there.

Put the date at the top of the big column. At the top of the left-hand column, write "done." And at the top of the middle column, write "finish by." In the big area, write down the things that are running around in your head like screaming children, all those things you need to do. You don't need to put this in any kind of order yet, just get them out of your head.

Adam: So, in the example in the show notes, that's called To-Do List 1. This is a student who's listed all the things that they need to do. So, they have an English paper that's due on the fifth of October. They're writing this on September 15th.

They need to plan a research project for geography that's due on October 7th. They've got a biology lab due this coming Thursday.

But they also have to get new socks. They need to call their parents, and let their parents know they're alive. They've got to go to a professor's office hours and that's on Tuesday. They're confused about calculus, so they need to get a tutor. They need to do laundry. Apparently, their roommate has been eating their yogurts, and they need to talk to the roommate about not doing that. They need quarters because they need to do their laundry, they need laundry soap, they need dish soap. They need to buy more yogurts, probably because the roommate ate them all. They need to clean the bathroom. They've got the living area of the dorm room and they've got to vacuum that. They need to take out the garbage.

Now, this is a big list, right? But now it's no longer running around in their head.

Dinur: And note that not everything is school stuff, but it's what's been on your mind, right? And now that it's out of your head, you can start to deal with this.

Write down everything that's bugging you. It might take a page or two pages, but get it out of your head and onto the paper.

Once this is out on the page, go through the list and mark down when these things need to get done by. This is the first step to getting them into a system that will help you get things done. If you look at the example called To-Do List 2 in the show notes, you'll see what we're talking about here.

Adam: So, now this student has gone through their list of all the things they need to do. And in the due by this date or finished by this date column, what they've done is they've written down the date that things need to get done.

So obviously, the English paper due on the 5th is due, got to do it by the 5th.

The research project is due on the 7th so they've got to do that.

On Tuesday, they need to finish the lab for biology that's due on Thursday. Well, they'll try to get it done a couple of days early.

They need to get new socks, but that can probably wait until next month. They need to call their parents; they'll do that this coming Friday. They have to go to Professor Smith's hours on Tuesday, because that's when they are. On Friday, they want to get a tutor for calculus, they're scheduling their laundry and their grocery run and clean, you know, they need to do those things - going to do those on Saturday. But they've put "I need to talk to my roommate about the yogurts" today and "I need to take out the garbage" today.

So, this gives them a better handle on when things need to get done, because some of the can be combined. For example, getting quarters, getting laundry soap, getting dish soap, getting food, that can all be a grocery trip that they schedule for Saturday. Calling their parents on Friday might coincide with asking for mom and dad's help in paying for a calculus tutor, which they will have already researched and contacted earlier that day.

Dinur: Now, one thing to keep in mind is that the to-do list is mostly scratch paper. Once you have an organized to-do list, you're going to transfer these items into your planner and onto your wall calendar. And we're going to talk about that next week's episode.

Adam: Right. Yeah, I've had students who say, "Well, I just keep adding to my to-do list."

And I ask, "How many things to be crossed out?"

And they're like, "Well, nothing."

Well, then that's not helping you, okay? The goal is to make a list of things that are going to go in your planner. And it may seem like it doesn't make sense, but this keeps you from having to say whiteout things in your planner or get big heavy eraser marks in your planner because you didn't write down what you needed to do on the right date. This allows you to plan it beforehand, and then stick it in the planner where you'll use it.

So, let's talk about how teachers and students can use this. And the first thing is, I tell my students about every three or four days, I say, "Okay, are you stressed out?" And some of them will always nod their heads.

And I'll say, "When's the last time you did a to-do list?"

And they'll go "Oh, like two weeks ago."

Okay, well, then you need to write this stuff down! You're stressing out because you're trying to keep everything in your head. So, do a stress check every now and then. Like every three or four days, just ask them, "Hey, anybody stressed? When's the last time you did a to-do list?"

Dinur: And one thing that we as teachers can do is we can give our students time in class to right that to-do list, we need to let them talk about what the to-do list is doing to them or for them, I should say. Or we can assign them a small reflection paper so that our students can list the benefits of using their to-do list.

Adam: Yeah, one of the things that I do in my classes is, I give them a little quiz after I give them the workshop that this series is based on. And I've had students say, "My head feels so much lighter, I feel so much less stressed. I can look at all the things and I thought that I had so much more to do than I actually do. It's more manageable now that I could look at it."

Students overwhelmingly report that being allowed to take five or 10 minutes to write down everything that's on their mind allows them to focus in class, it allows them to focus on their work, it allows them to not stress out about "oh God, I've got this and this and this," because it's written down.

I did have one student who said, "I'm worried that I won't remember any of these now that they're not running around in my head anymore." Well, you're going to learn to use a planner. Don't worry, they will be there, you just have to switch to a new way of doing it that doesn't involve keeping your schedule in your head, which is really, actually really counterproductive.

Dinur: And one thing that students have said repeatedly, is that just writing down what's in their head, give students two advantages. One, like Adam said, it gets quieter in their head because everything is written down. Students aren't trying to keep track of everything just by thinking about it. And students also see that generally, their to-do list isn't as many things or as much work as they thought it was going to be. So, that confusion is taking up energy, but it's not helping students learn more, it's not helping students get work done more. And so actually physically writing these steps down, ends up helping because it takes all of that nervous energy away, and that allows whatever energy does exist to be more focused.

Adam: One of the ways that I've represented this to students is like Dinur said, your head's full of thoughts is like a bunch of screaming children running around on the playground. So, you want to get them in line so you can figure out what each of them

needs to do. Or another way to think of it is, it's a beehive that's been shaken. So, now it's full of all these angry, freaked-out bees. So, get the bees out of your head and write them down. You're putting them in a hive that you can keep control of. So, I say get the bees out of your head.

I want to go back too for a minute, for teachers, use this tool yourself too. Let them know you use it. Talk about the advantages you've seen from using it. How much are you trying to carry around in your head? That faculty meeting, that other thing you've got to do, that committee meeting that you've got to go to, that commitment that you've got that's outside of campus, you know, that writing project? How much of this are you trying to keep in your head? How stressed out is it making you?

If you model using this for the students, you could even say, "all right, we're all going to write a to-do list, and I'm going to share mine so that the students see, "oh, you know, Professor Jones or Professor Martinez also has to deal with this stuff. Hmm. Maybe it doesn't make me so bad that I can't carry it around in my head."

And so, students, you know, anytime you feel stressed about what you need to get done, just sit down, write out a to-do list, get the thoughts out of your head, put them where you can look at them; you'll immediately feel like you have a little bit more control over this.

Dinur: And to reiterate what Adam said, you have to keep your to-do list where you can see it and access it because just writing it down is the first step. But it's only effective if you're able to cross things off as you complete them. And to do that, you need to keep the list where you can get to it and where you can see it.

Now keep in mind that just making this to-do list is not the last step for learning how to manage your time. With a to-do list you can now use a planner and a wall calendar to plan out when you're going to get these things done and we'll talk about that in Episode 13 --

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.

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.