



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

Episode 16: Disciplined Planning

[Theme Music]

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

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

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

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier! This is Episode 16, the fifth and final episode of our Time Management series, where Adam and I talk about how discipline will get you a lot farther than motivation.

Adam: I also want to apologize, because we thought we had six episodes, but I miscounted, so this is the final episode of our Time Management series.

Now, the last strategy we want to give you for time management is disciplined planning. Disciplined planning means realizing that motivation and multitasking are mainly myths - and we're going to have some episodes in the future on those topics - but also learning that boredom is not a good reason for not doing what you need to do, and that procrastination is really just a failure of discipline.

Planning encompasses a lot of what we've already talked about - setting goals, breaking them into manageable pieces, and scheduling them into your life - but disciplined planning means sticking to those goals and following through.

Dinur: You have to figure out what your goals actually are. What does it mean when you say, "I want to reach my goals?" Well, goals are about creating some sort of change in your life. Maybe

you want to lose a little weight. Maybe you want to bench an additional 150 pounds within six months. Maybe you want to learn how to play guitar well enough so that you can play some songs at parties, or you want to learn how to write well enough so that you can consistently get B's or better on your class assignments.

Adam: Now when you're in college, most of your goals are going to be the type that James Clear calls "logarithmic." Logarithmic goals help you grow and change really quickly in the beginning, but as you get better at what you're doing, improvement becomes more and more detailed. The gains get smaller and smaller and smaller.

So, this is why Josh Kaufman found that it only takes 20 focused hours to get reasonably competent - because you get a lot of progress right at the beginning - but it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert. So, think of this as a form of diminishing returns. You get a big return on your investment of time early on, you become competent - but afterwards it takes a much bigger investment of more and more hours to make a similar level of advancement.

Dinur: Now the other kind of goal is what James Clear calls "exponential," where it's really hard and slow going at the beginning but as you get better at it the gains get bigger and bigger. Think of this as the kind of growth you see in a savings plan with a decent interest rate, for example. As your money grows due to interest, your principal keeps getting bigger and bigger, and that generates more interest income, and it's a big feedback loop. It just keeps going over and over and over, growing and growing.

Adam: Now, most college goals fall into the logarithmic category, because when you first start a class, you know nothing about that topic. And then, after about 2 or 3 weeks, you've learned a ton of things about its topic, and after that, it's a smaller, additive process. So, instead of learning all the basics - which you're doing in the first 3, maybe 4, weeks of class, suddenly you're learning additional stuff about the basics.

You're learning things instead of learning new, gigantic concepts. For example, in my theory class, we spent the first two or three weeks going over "this is what a theory is, this is how it works, this is how we use it, this is why we use it, these are some of the things that you need to know about how theories work, the pieces of a theory," and so forth. I remember us talking about, in a previous episode, about how, at the beginning of the class time of a term, it's going to be kind of dry.

It's a lot of dry information, but that is where we make the biggest gains in learning, is all that dry information. Like, "here's a thing that we're going to be using every week to analyze theories, learn it now," right? So, the thing is when you start learning new theories, you've already got the framework in place. So it's just "slot stuff into frameworks." That's a smaller, incremental gain of learning; it's not a whole new big thing that you're learning.

And so, this is how most college goals are. They fall into this logarithmic category of a big gain in the beginning, and then tiny little gains after that. So, this means you've got to be prepared, as a student, for the need to take a lot of little small steps toward a goal, and to understand that once you get past those easy beginnings, it's going to be time to buckle down for the long haul.

Dinur: And to put it really, really, really bluntly, don't get too comfortable with the early, rapid learning that you're achieving. It's great you're getting the foundation down, but a foundation needs to hold more than just itself. When we talked about all that dry material at the beginning, yeah, we know it might be boring, but we're giving you the foundation for how we've set up the class, and we need you to know this foundation, but you're going to need to build on that.

So, just having a foundation, just having a basis probably won't get you to where you want to go or where you need to go. And this means that eventually you have to put your head down and you have to work hard, to maintain and keep increasing your achievements.

That means you've got to get pumped up. You've got to get motivated. Right?

No, you don't.

Adam: Motivation is the wrong way to go about this, and I know that sounds really weird, and it goes against everything you've been told about motivation, but because logarithmic goals take a long time to achieve, and because we naturally get discouraged when we stop seeing these easy early wins, the key to success with a logarithmic goal - which is most of your goals in college - is to break it up into a lot of small tasks that each give us some kind of feeling of achievement.

We already talked about breaking big goals down into short-term tasks and we did that in Episode 13, about time management and using a planner in a calendar. Now, that breaking the big goal into little tasks, that's the essence of setting and planning long-term goals.

Dinur: Now let's talk about why this will create more success than just sitting around waiting to get motivated, and given that I am the sports nut on this podcast, if you ever hear sports clichés, they go along the lines of, from hockey, “we take the game one shift at a time” or “we took the game one play at a time,” or from baseball “one pitch at a time.”

It's the idea of taking the big thing the big goal of getting that win, and breaking it into smaller manageable pieces, and smaller chunks of time.

Adam: “You're only as good as your last game, you're only as good as your last attempt, you're only as good as your last pitch, your last swing, your last shot, your last throw.” And if we look at it that way, then any one individual swing, shot, or throw becomes slightly less important, because what we're looking at is the curve of all of those shots, of all of those goals, of all of those pitches. How are you doing overall?

And if we think that we have to be super motivated, that's a problem.

Dinur: Now keep in mind, motivation sounds terrific. It sounds amazing on the surface. We hear a lot about motivation right? We have motivational speakers, and the basic idea behind motivation is that we have to be in this certain headspace or we won't have any desire to do what we need to do, right?

That's the idea that you have to be inspired, be passionate about what you're doing, otherwise, yeah, there's no point in doing it.

Adam: So, it's a good thing the world doesn't work this way! Because otherwise we'd have a lot of unfinished buildings, because the carpenters just didn't feel inspired to build a house that morning. We'd have rotting food in restaurants, because the chefs just didn't have a passion for cooking that day. We'd have judges blowing off their responsibilities, because they just didn't feel anything positive when they looked at their docket.

Dinur: Imagine the chaos if DMV employees walked out of work because work didn't make them excited, or if doctors decided let's go and stay let's stay home, let's play golf, because the idea of doing one more open-heart surgery just didn't seem really stimulating that day.

Adam: So, you see how ridiculous motivation becomes when you realize what it would mean if it really were the main reason why people got things done? So motivation sounds great in

theory. In practice, it ain't going to get you where you want to go. Persistence will, and that requires discipline, not motivation.

Now I will say this: once you have discipline, then motivation works better but if you have no discipline, motivation does not help you at all. In fact, it may make you feel worse when you don't achieve what you wanted to achieve, because you felt fired up but you didn't know how to get there.

Dinur: And discipline means building up the persistence muscle. Allison Greene, of the Ask A Boss column at NYmag.com, notes that when the persistence muscle has atrophied from lack of use, it's hard to get it going again. She suggests several methods to develop the persistence muscle.

One, Break things down so you can do things one step at a time.

Two, decide to do just ten minutes of the task, because once you do ten minutes you'll almost always find that you get into the rhythm of the task and it becomes easier. And something that I can tell you all is, I do a lot of data entry as part of a research project that I'm doing, and there's a lot of both rows and columns. I'm looking at a big Excel sheet and I'm looking at a codebook and going back and forth to figure out how I want to code certain things. What numbers go in what boxes?

After about 10 minutes of doing it, I get into the habit. I go, okay I'm in this column here's what I need to look for. I'm in this column, here's what I need to look for. And it becomes routine, but those first 10 minutes or so, it's painful, because I'm constantly going from the screen, to my codebook, back to the screen, back to the codebook.

It's establishing that rhythm. Once that rhythm is established it becomes a piece of cake.

Adam: And this in some ways taps into what I think his last name is pronounced something like Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and he investigated flow. And the thing is that the first 10 minutes, you're never in flow. You're never in that where you're so focused on what you're doing that you lose track of time. That happened just this morning, actually, my husband said to me last night, "okay, so I want to be at this meeting with my writers group at 8 o'clock this morning." I woke up at 7:30 and he was in the office still and I'm like, "okay, well it's not that far

away, maybe he's packing up," and then eight o'clock rolled around, and he still hadn't packed up.

And I walked in and said, "Joe, didn't you have to be someplace at 8 o'clock?"

And he was like "oh god, I just got so lost in what I was doing!" He was in flow.

And what this researcher says is that if we can get through those - or what it seems to be is that if we can get into the first 10 minutes, then we get into flow, and once we're in flow, we stop realizing how much time we're spending, because we're enjoying what we're doing. We're at least into what we're doing, okay? And so those 10 minutes are crucial.

So, let's talk about the two techniques that Allison Greene gave us in more detail.

So, first break it down and reward each task. You've already learned how to take a big goal and break it down into small tasks if you've been following our podcast (and if you haven't then you can go back and listen to episodes 12, 13, 14, around there). Now the goal is to reward yourself for completing each of those little tasks, and it doesn't have to be a big reward.

James Clear suggests maybe just saying, "I rock!" or "I am awesome!" after you complete it. It's just a little thing to get the dopamine flowing.

Dinur: And another idea is you create a punch card, like what you get in coffee shops, you know, where after you buy nine coffees you get the tenth free. So, punch off one marker, one spot, after each completed short-term task, and decide on some small reward that you're going to give yourself after the tenth hole is punched off.

So, maybe you buy yourself a coffee, you spend a little time on social media, it's something. It's a small reward for completing some small tasks.

Adam: And I will say that just the act of punching the card gives you a little dopamine hit, all right? There's a reason we associate certain sounds with "yay with that's happy, that makes me feel good." Back in the day before credit cards were read digitally, back when they had to run them through a card impression machine where they would go - they would like drag this impression machine across the card, over a carbon to press the card in.

There were people who got that feeling of "yeah I got something cool I got something good, I feel good about this," they were getting a dopamine hit from the sound of the credit card impression maker, you know? Well, that feeling of punching a hole in a punch card, that also

gives you that little dopamine hit, and that's what you're looking for is that little hit of “yay,” the dopamine hormone that makes you feel good.

You can also take those cards and save them, and then give yourself a bigger reward for completing more of them. So, for example, if each card represents 20 hours of work - let's say you decided you're going to spend 2 hours per short-term task, which is what we suggest, and you've punched out a card ten times. You've got 20 hours of work there. Now if you reach 10 cards, or 200 hours of work you could give yourself a bigger reward. You could make a deal with yourself or your parents that you get a new bicycle or you get a trip to Disneyland.

I had a client who was working on that who was one of my coaching clients, he was a high school student. He had done 17 10-hour cards, because in high school they try to keep you about an hour for study session.

So, he had done 17 cards. That's 170 hours of study and his parents have promised him that when he got to the end of 20 cards, they were going to take him to Disney World.

Dinur: I used to say things like all right for 15 minutes, all right for a half an hour, and then I'm going to take a break, right. I'm going to get motivated, I'm going to write for this length of time, then I'm going to just be able to coast, I'll be good.

Well, turns out I'd write a sentence, then I'd start surfing the internet, check Facebook ,check my emails, respond to emails.... before I knew it those 15 minutes or 30 minutes or an hour that was up, but obviously I'm not getting anything done, right?

Now I know that Adam and I earlier said you need to spend at least 10 minutes doing the habit, but once you get into that flow mindset that Adam had talked about, the words start flowing a little bit easier. They start coming out, and you get lost in what you're doing. And so what I tell myself now is instead of saying, “I'll write for 15 minutes,” I'll say “I'm going to write a paragraph,” or “I'll write a page or two pages,” and if I'm not in flow yet, I'll take a break and then I'll tell myself again, okay, “I'm going to write a paragraph, I'll write a page or half a page,” something like that. And given enough time and enough repetition, flow mindset eventually sets in. And what ends up happening is I can relax, tied to something concrete. I can see that I've put words on the screen. I'm not necessarily just looking at the clock.

Adam: This also works for if you're writing a paper. I'm going to do one page a day, or, you know, my husband - he's a writer, and his daily goal is 500 words. He usually exceeds it but he's

got to get his 500 words. Right now, I'm learning Hebrew through Duolingo, and I have required myself to do 50 XP a day, even if it means I have to go over a lesson over and over and over again to get to 50 XP. I do it every day, that's my goal.

And so you can set something concrete like that, but you also have to say at minimum I'm going to work on this for 10 minutes, because the goal is to get yourself into flow and if you don't give yourself at least 10 minutes, then you'll never know that you can get into flow. If you tell yourself that you're going to work on something for 10 minutes, it makes it feel a lot less oppressive.

It also makes it a lot more likely that you will get into flow, that you will get into the task and work longer than 10 minutes. According to Alison Greene, this is often because the task is really not as awful in reality as it was in your mind.

Telling yourself, "I'll just do it for 10 minutes" - that will often get you past that first hump of procrastination and resistance. Think about it. How often have you put off doing the laundry, and put off doing laundry, and then when you finally do it, it's like it's not that big of a deal. Even if you put it off for a week, you're like, "well, okay, so it was an extra load but it's still only three hours of laundry, and I could do other things while it's running. it wasn't as big a deal as I thought it was going to be."

I've had students tell me that the way I teach them to break down writing assignments has made it so that they can't really say, "oh, this is going to take forever," because it won't. And they can see it won't, because they can see: five small steps, and you have an annotated bibliography. So, that really - it takes away your excuses too.

Dinur: Keep in mind, deciding to persist is nowhere near as fun as feeling inspired, right? Feeling inspired has you passionate, it has you energized, has you ready to run through a brick wall to get what you want to get done completed. We're telling you, relax and focus, relax and focus. Probably isn't nearly as fun and it's nowhere near as intense as feeling inspired but this relaxed focus helps you get your job done.

Motivation is going to leave you sitting, playing Minecraft, playing World of Warcraft, playing Fortnite, whatever you're playing - and you know you better than we do. So, whatever it is you're playing it, you're avoiding getting your work done, and you're not completing what you need to actually complete.

Adam: Now the other thing about discipline - a lot of people hear the word “discipline” and they think of it as something uncomfortable or even as a punishment. But the core of self-discipline is really setting boundaries with yourself. What have you actively decided to do with your time, with your energy, with your money, with your other resources?

When you develop self-discipline you also get a crucial second skill - the ability to set boundaries, not just with yourself, but with other people as well, because this one helps you control your time and energy, your money, and what you're going to give to other people who are making demands on those things.

Dinur: And hopefully this helps you feel more in charge of yourself, more control of yourself. You're not feeling like you're being pulled in 50 different directions at once, because you've been able to cut through a lot of this stress. You know how you can manage your time and your energy, and you are going to get things done.

And the way teachers can use this: let's show our students how we divide our tasks into smaller segments, and discuss the rewards we give ourselves. How do we plan our lessons? What are our one steps at a time, right? What's the big theme for that week? How do I decide what I want to lecture on? How do I try and budget my time? And we can show our students, look, it's not always perfect, but here's the thought process and this is how we go through.

It goes into the idea of, again, being transparent, being honest with our students about what we do, kind of demystifying what we do and showing them what we want them to learn in our classes. In addition to showing them how we plan this, what do we do after a lesson is planned? How do we reward ourselves how do we expect our students to follow what we say if we can't show them that we practice what we preach?

Adam: Modeling is critical. Another thing that's critical is to be a mentor here, remind your students: successful work does not happen in one fell swoop. Successful work takes time, it takes patience, it takes effort, and it takes the ability to understand that it's never going to be perfect. And too many of our students, they put it off, because they're afraid of it not being perfect, they're afraid of it not being the ideal that brings tears to their teachers eyes because it's beautiful, not because it's painful.

And so, I remind my students that I am still a work in progress, that some of the things I'm doing are still not as good as I want them to be, and that that's going to have to be okay. I read

something on Facebook just the other day, it was a woman talking about how, as a social worker her supervisor who was teaching her social work in her Masters program: “You have to realize that every day, your clients are doing the best they can, and sometimes their best isn't very good, but sometimes your best won't be very good.”

And I have to take that to my classes and remember, as Dinur says, we teach students, not classes, and I have to say to myself, these kids are doing the best they can today. I have no idea what else they're dealing with. And so, reminding those kids too, that “yes, you're doing the best you can today, I understand that. Sometimes your best is not enough and that's something that you need to adjust around or learn to cope with.”

So, successful work will happen, but you've got to put in the time, you've got to be patient with yourself, you've got to ask for help when you need it, and you've got to realize that that “write the paper tonight before it's due and turn it in,” is a rare bird that gets anything better than a C.

And that's really hard for some of our students to understand. This is like a - it's almost a cultural bedrock for them that being able to fast without any effort is what means that you're a good student, and that is not the case at all.

Dinur: And one thing that Adam and I've discussed on previous episodes, is as teachers, we have to emphasize that we're looking at progress. We're looking at the actual steps students are taking towards improving, towards becoming better, and we need to acknowledge, and we need to praise, and we need to evaluate these steps. There's more that goes into a final paper than just that one draft, but if all students get graded on is that one final draft then that's going to scare them. They're not going to see that it's an incremental process. So it's up to us to be able to show and be able to help students; divide some of our assignments into smaller pieces, and be able to give them advice and be able to help them and watch as they take their steps. We want to see them grow.

Adam: The ways the students can use this, we've really kind of talked that almost into the ground, but students, also remember: Successful work takes time, it takes patience, and it takes discipline. But when you start using that self-discipline to say “okay, I'm going to do this for at least ten minutes,” you will be amazed at how much it changes the way you approach it.

There's a writer that I like called Lauren Handel Zander, and she calls it “the brat.” And the brat's going to say “I don't wanna! I don't wanna! I don't want to do this! It's stupid!”

Okay, well, we only have to do it for ten minutes, and if we're not into it within ten minutes, we'll change it and do something else. Usually, that's enough to shut the brat up long enough to get what you want to get done, done, or at least started.

Remember, too, you've got to focus on the fact that a big project is a series of small steps. You've got to reward yourself for each small step - not a big reward, but acknowledge yourself. Just like we're asking teachers to acknowledge the students' progress, acknowledge your own progress. A lot of us have real difficulty seeing that "having finished all the research for the paper; made all the notes that we need; we've pulled all the ideas that we need; we've got all of our citations written," that that's a big step of the process! It's a big chunk of the process.

When Dinur said teachers, tell your students, you know, about how you lesson plan - I did that I told my students okay, for the first three weeks, I was rewriting every single lecture. So, that I had a script, so that when I did my lesson videos, I wasn't rambling and talking like this and going all over the place. I was slow, focused. I had - I knew what I was going to talk about, so that if they asked me a question in class, I could pull the script up, and look at it, and say "okay, right here, let's talk about that."

And a lot of my students said "wait, you don't have all this memorized?"

And I'm all, "Are you kidding?"

And students, we don't expect you to be perfect! There will be that occasional professor who's a jerk and expects everybody to be perfect. He or she or they - they're an anomaly. They're a weirdo. You don't need to worry about their opinion of you. Is it going to matter after you leave their class? No! So don't worry too much about that. Spend your time focusing on what you can do to be successful today. What can you do to get something done today? And discipline, developing discipline as a habit, is really, really important for achieving your goals.

Dinur: It's the idea of controlling what you can, and one of the things that you absolutely can control is your work ethic. The fact that you're willing to put X amount of time, with consistent energy into playing guitar better, writing a paper, doing your lab, whatever it is. You're breaking it up, but you're taking that time, and you're spending that energy in a good focused way to improve.

So, that's it for Episode 16! If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends, we're always hoping to get new subscribers so we can help even more and more people.

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Adam: And be sure to join us next week for Episode 17, when we'll talk about how to take effective notes, both in class and when you're studying.

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

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

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

Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week.