



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

Episode 26: Take Your Time to Do It Right

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. This is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 26, take your time to do it right.

Our society rushes everyone. Employers rush their employees, parents rush their children, administrators rush their teachers, teachers sometimes rush their students. But what if we learned to slow down and take the time to do our work well? In this episode, Adam and I discuss some ways to slow yourself down, so you can take the time to do your work right.

Adam: Now, there are four main reasons why we rush through our tasks. We have too much to do, meaning we're overloaded; or, we think that we won't be effective or efficient if we slow down; or, we're used to rushing and slowing down feels really weird; or, we feel like if we're not rushing, we'll be viewed as lazy or unproductive because we're confusing speed with efficiency.

Dinur: Now, conceptually, if you have too much to do, then the solution is simple, but it's not easy. You have to learn to cut back on what you're doing. And part of that is learning to say "no."

Drawing boundaries can feel uncomfortable. It can be tough. But the only people who are going to get offended when you draw a boundary are the people who benefit from you not having any boundaries, right? These are the people who are going to constantly make more, and more, and more demands on your time, because they know that you're going to give in, and they're going to get what they want.

Adam: Now, as an example, if your parents are demanding that you get straight A's, and you know that that chemistry class is probably not going to be one where you are going to get a straight A, you can tell them, "Mom, Dad, I need you to be okay with me having a B in that class."

And if they say "No, you have to get a straight A," then you could say, "Well, you can want me to do that. That doesn't mean I'm going to be able to. I'm aiming for a B."

When you set a boundary - this is really important - you don't tell the other person, "you can't do this thing." What you say is, "if you do this thing, this will be my response."

So if they say, "Well, if you don't get straight A's, then we're going to throw you out of the house," then you say, "Fine, thank you for letting me know. I'm going to be looking for a job now."

Because you have to be the one deciding your own future. And if you know that that class is going to be a tough class, it's not your major, but you've got to take it, because you've got a general ed requirement and know that chemistry has never been your thing - well, then you're going to do the best you can, but you're not going to beat yourself up if you don't get a straight A in that class. And if their demand is that you beat yourself up and get a straight A and under no circumstances are you allowed to get anything less, that's not a reasonable demand. You have the right to say no.

Dinur: Adam and I also deal with having to set boundaries. I deal with it at work. Sometimes students will ask me, for example, for letters of recommendation, but they're asking it right at the time where I have a ton of papers to grade, or a ton of exams to worry about. And I know if I were to write a letter for them then, it's not going to be a very good letter. It would just be "this person was in my class, this is the grade they got" - but that doesn't highlight how well that student did, or what I remember about them.

So there are times where I tell the student, "No, I can't write a letter for you now, but can you come back in a week or two after I get through this pile of grading?" And learning to do that works a lot better, because the student understands - or generally understands - that I'm trying to highlight them and put them in the best light possible. But part of that means I need the time and the energy to do so. If I'm overwhelmed, if I'm overloaded with work, then I'm gonna write something that doesn't help me and it doesn't help the student. So why do that?

Adam: And this also gives you practice in setting boundaries outside of school, because you may have a boss that demands that you work overtime every week, and you may not be able to do it. And you have to be able to have that practice to say, "No, I can give you an hour of overtime on Mondays, but that's it. On Tuesdays through Fridays I have other obligations, I can't stay late." And if your boss gets angry, then you know that's not the job for you.

Drawing boundaries may feel uncomfortable. Saying no may feel uncomfortable. But if you are piling on and piling on and piling on, eventually you're going to come apart at the seams.

Dinur: Part of our advice is also geared to the students who work full time. And both Adam and I've taught a lot of first-generation students, who take a full course load, and they work full time. And it's tough, because there's only so much time and so much energy that a person has, and eventually either the work goes down, or the classwork goes down, because they're exhausted or both.

So, if you're working a full time job, you need to weigh your options. How many classes can you reasonably take and work at that job? Keep in mind that typically, one credit hour for a class means three hours of work expected, because you're putting in time both inside the classroom and outside the classroom. I've had students who've taken six classes when four's considered full time. And some of them did well in my class, some of them didn't. Some of them were able to deal with that, but I don't know how their grades were in other classes, so they may have done well for me and struggled elsewhere.

Schoolwork is very much a job for you at this point, in addition to anything that may actually pay you. That means you need the time and the energy to dedicate to your job to be able to do it well.

Adam: Just to put this in perspective, if you are taking a full class load, what the school recommends, you are expected to probably put in anywhere from 36 to 42 hours a week on the schoolwork. A lot of students think that one credit hour is one hour of work, so “if I take 12 credits, that means I'm doing 12 hours of work. “No, you're doing 36 hours of work.

If you are going to school full time, it's a full-time job. If you're trying to work a full-time job and go to school full time, you're basically - when do you sleep? When do you eat? What do you bathe? When do you have time to do any of that? You don't. Especially if you're commuting. I can't imagine the idea of trying to work full time and go to school full time. You would have no life left.

And the thing is, I had a student who tried this, and it did not end well. They were taking a four-unit class from me. This was about two years ago. I know I've described them before, but I'm going to bring this up again because not all of you have heard all the episodes. So this young gentleman was probably early twenties I would say 23, 24. He came into my office one day about two weeks into the semester, and I swear he was vibrating. He was shaking so badly. It looked like he had Parkinson's. And he was only 23 or 24 so there was probably no way he had Parkinson's at that age.

And he says to me, “I need to know how to make sure that I only have to spend four hours of a week on your class.”

I said, “it's a four unit class man, it's a 16 hour a week commitment. It can't be done.”

“Well, it has to be.”

And I said, “You don't understand, man. You can't do this class in four hours a week. It is not possible.”

He's all, “well, I have to finish it in this, I have to be done.”

And I said, “Why?”

Well after a little bit of talking, it turned out that he had a full time job that worked the night shift and it was a physical job at a warehouse, so he was wearing himself out physically. He was taking, I believe it was 12 units, which was the recommended unit load at our school, but then he was also taking on additional 12 units at two different community colleges in their online programs, and his wife had just had a baby.

And I said, “When do you sleep?”

He says, “I - I drink Monster.”

I said, “When do you sleep?”

He says, “I get about two hours and then I drink Monster.”

So he was drinking something like six or seven cans of Monster a day to try to keep himself operational.

And I said, “Man, you're heading for a stroke at the age of 26! What are you doing?”

He says, “I have to finish this. I have to be done with my bachelor's degree in two years.”

I said, "Okay. When did you start school?"

He said, "Last year."

So he was trying to cram about 18 pounds of stuff into a two-pound bag. Folks, time doesn't work that way. Your body doesn't work that way. Your brain will not be able to process the information it needs to process for your job or for your classwork. So if you're going to work full time, you have to accept you've got to go to school part time, because you've got to have enough time to eat, sleep, spend a little time with your partner, see your kids if you have kids.

You cannot be enrolled in 12 units, working a full time job, and expect to survive that without going a little nuts at the end of it, if not worse.

That student kept insisting that I had to find him a way to do that four unit class in four hours a week. And when he realized I wasn't going to be giving him what he wanted, he left. And then two weeks later he stopped showing up to class. I never even got a drop notification. He just stopped showing up. And I really hope that he was okay, 'cause I never heard from him again.

So that's just the first thing - you have too much to do. You've got to cut back.

Now the second thing, if you think that you won't be effective or efficient, if you slow down, it's time to examine that belief. It's a cultural belief. We have a lot of people in this country and around the world, especially in Western nations, who say "if you do not hurry all the time, if you are not rushing all the time, if you are not on all the time, then you will not be effective and you will not be efficient." And that is not actually true.

Test the thought. If you think a task will take 15 minutes, give yourself 25. If you think it'll take an hour, give yourself an hour and a half, maybe even two hours. See how much you can get done by allowing yourself to take a little more time to do it, and compare its quality to what you'd have if you only took 15 minutes instead of 25

Dinur: Oh, Adam and I both teach in Los Angeles, which means we are very used to the idea of traffic. And it is awful. One thing I've learned from living down here is, you either have to leave early to arrive on time. If you leave on time, you're arriving late.

So think about this with your schoolwork or with your actual work. Do you feel like you do your best job if you're barely making it to work on time, or you're barely making it to class before the lecture starts? Or do you feel like you're doing a little bit better when you've built that buffer in, where you are able to leave maybe 15 or 20 minutes earlier, and now you've been able to save that time? Maybe grab a cup of coffee and come into class fresh and set.

Adam: One thing that you might want to do to make yourself do this is, if your class starts at three o'clock, tell yourself it starts at 2:45. Write it down that way in your planner: class 2:45 - 4:00, not 3:00 - 4:00.

At the school that Dinur and I went to for grad School, they actually set up the classes so that they started at 10 minutes after the hour. Well, one of the things they knew about the human brain is that we look at the hour, not the minute. So if the class started at 1:10, most people would be getting there around one o'clock. Why? Because they saw the "1". So you set that up in your planner to say, this class starts at 2:45. Now it doesn't

actually start until three, but if you set it so that you're going at 2:45 you've got an extra 15 minutes to get there, to sit down, to unpack your backpack or your bag and put your stuff out on your desk, and be ready for the class.

And this issue of feeling like you won't be effective or efficient if you slow down - that also goes back to the race car brain issue that we talked about in Episode 3. It may feel like you're being more effective when you go faster, but speed does not necessarily equal smart. Deep learning, the kind that gets you the good grades on the tests and the papers, it's not something you can rush yourself into.

Dinur just mentioned being effective and efficient, and you know what? Sometimes that's a tradeoff. To be more effective at learning, maybe you need to be a little more inefficient about how you do it. What do you want? Efficient or effective? Effective often gets better scores.

Dinur: And I know that I'd mentioned my dissertation on here, as far as the writing process goes. Well, a dissertation is over a hundred pages long. It's all gonna happen in one night. It's not gonna happen in a week. You know what, it's not even going to happen in a month!

But what you do is you take each part of that dissertation. So for me it was one day I'd work a little bit on literature, or on my methods, or I would look at what people had told me in interviews. And I would just focus on doing a little tiny piece each day, because it's easier to focus on a small piece instead of getting overwhelmed by thinking about the finished product. And because I'm doing just a little bit at a time, I'm being efficient, but I don't feel like I'm rushing through it, because each part of that dissertation is getting my attention that day, and that way I'm focused on it. I'm not distracted, and the results, slowly but surely, built up.

Think about it like weightlifting. If you're trying to lose weight or build muscle, you're not going to lose a bunch of weight the first time you lift some weights or the first time you do cardio. But you do a little bit each day, and slowly but surely the results add up.

Adam: And the thing about effectiveness, too, I think effective outweighs efficient. And that's hard for me to say, because I'm the kind of person who likes to try to stuff 35 hours of work into 12 hours, and it's not doable. And I've started to train myself out of this by looking at the work that I've planned and then saying, "Okay, how much of this can I actually, reasonably, feasibly get done in the time that I have? And the brainpower that I have right now? And the energy levels that I have right now?"

So for example, on my schedule today, after Dinur and I finish recording this episode - and we've been recording today - it's going to be about probably one o'clock in the afternoon. And after that, what I've got listed for myself is that I want to edit a couple of our episodes, the audio, so that they're ready to go. And then I want to edit at least one more transcript of an episode so that that's ready to go. And that's probably all I'm going to be able to get done. And that may not sound like much, but it does mean that the transcript you get will be a good transcript, instead of this sort of, you know, half done, shoddy, slapdash piece of nonsense.

But do I feel bad that I can't also then get 97 other things done? Of course, because I was trained to believe that I have to rush, rush, rush, rush, rush, and that's the only way to be effective and efficient. But the fact is if I want to be effective, I've got to let go of efficient. I've got to spend time doing deeper work, rather than more work.

And so you have to look at, what is it that I'm doing? Am I writing flashcards? Okay. Writing flashcards could pretty much be a, an assembly line process, where you just write all of your questions and then you flip them

over, you write all the answers and, and maybe you're not thinking too much about it. If something you're doing is more or less than assembly line process, that doesn't require a lot of thought. You could probably do more of that. But we also tend to assume that any work can be done quickly and efficiently. Like if I need to do three loads of laundry, fine, I'm just going to run through them. Do I need to think much about that? Only if I have to think about the stain on the one shirt where I dropped the balsamic vinegar on it the other day that I have to think about it, but the rest of it, just throw it in the wash and get it done.

But when you are doing thinking work, you have to allow for the thought process, too. You have to allow for the energy that it takes to think, and so, if you're doing something like writing a paper and you say, "I'm going to do this paper in an hour," think back to what Dinur just said about the dissertation. It's really not a possible thing to write a paper in an hour, because you have to think about it. It's not just writing a bunch of words. If you were just writing a bunch of words, it wouldn't be a paper. It would be a typing test.

Dinur: You've no doubt heard the phrase, "work smarter not harder." This is us teaching you how to work smarter. "Smarter" meaning more effective, deeper learning, not just superficial glossing over of the material.

If you're used to rushing because you're always rushed, then your brain is going to feel very strange when you slow down. Some people get a rush out of rushing, and they feel like they've won something when they do something fast, and this can be really, really hard to give up.

It's intuitive, right? You watch the Olympics, you watched the sprint, whoever finishes fastest has won - but learning doesn't work like this.

Try the steps that Adam and I discussed for slowing down just a little bit, and try and retrain your brain to take a little more time. Train yourself to get the rush from what you produce, not how fast you produced it.

Adam: For me, I got the biggest rush when I realized that I had finished the 13th draft of my dissertation. I had incorporated all the suggestions from my committee, and now the only thing left was defense. I was done with the writing part.

I got such a rush out of that. It took me over six months to get to draft 13. I was essentially doing a draft every two weeks. I was not rushing any of those drafts. And that feeling of victory, that feeling of, "Oh my gosh, I did this!" did not come until that last draft, when I got it back from the chair of my committee and he said, "you need to schedule your defense. You're done." Then I got the rush.

But in undergrad, I was one of those students who felt that if I got more and more and more done, I would get more and more and more rush..

You know the thing about that rush? It's an endorphin rush. You know what happens if you get too many endorphin rushes? You get used to them. And then they don't work as well. If you only get them every now and then, they work much better.

Retraining your brain to get along without the rush is good. Retraining your brain to just get some satisfaction out of it, not necessarily a rush, is better - because that way the rush, when it comes, is a surprise, and it feels fantastic, and it usually gets reserved for the big things.

Finishing the dissertation, finishing that semester-long paper, finishing that really big project and getting it done, finishing the capstone class. These are all things for which you want a rush.

But one quiz? If you get a rush from one quiz, if you get a rush from a little paper that you wrote in class, maybe you're getting the rush too often, and you need to slow down.

Dinur: Adam mentioned the rush he got from finishing draft 13, For me, my rush with the dissertation was seeing it as a complete document for the first time. Because I'd worked on not even a chapter at a time - I'd worked on parts of a chapter at a time.

And now, to see everything together as one big thing that I'd written? That was a huge rush. Because I'd never written a paper that long or a work that long. I don't think - I'm not, I'm not planning on doing another dissertation anytime ever. One degree is enough!

But seeing it all together, seeing it all tied up, that cumulation of months and months and months and months of work - that that was one hell of a rush for me.

Adam: So that's the third thing. If you're used to rushing because you always rushed, it's time to learn how to slow down.

And finally, if you rush because you're worried about what other people will think of you if you don't - talk to the people who matter to you the most. Explain that you are stressed out because you're always rushing, and you're going to work on approaching your work in a more measured and focused way, but you're worried that they will think less of you.

And then watch and listen as all of them say, "are you kidding? I'm going to be so relieved to not see you stressing out all the time, 'cause you stress out way too much, man," or "you stress out way too much, hon."

If you go to your parents and tell them, "I'm going to work on not stressing myself out so much," as long as they have not pressed that value into you by their own actions, they'll probably be pretty relieved too.

And this actually leads us into figuring out whose opinion actually matters. If it's your professor, their opinion probably matters. If it's the people in your study group, their opinion probably matters. If it's your best friend and you study with them, their opinion probably matters.

If it's someone who's walking past you in the library, their opinion does not matter. If it's someone who thinks they know everything about how studying works, and they've always rushed, so everyone has to, and they have no power over any of your outcomes? Then their views don't matter. There's a Dr. Seuss thing: "those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind." So if someone's offended by you not rushing, I can almost guarantee you they don't matter.

Dinur: The people who matter are the people who are in the arena with you, the people who want to see you do well, because they have your best interests at heart. And if they do, and you trust them, be honest with them. Explain to them the situation, explain to them that you're trying to retrain. If I have students who tell me that they're rushed and that they're stressed, I've been going to ask them to spell out what they're doing, day to day, so that we can figure out: how can we scale back a little bit to let you relax and do a little bit better work without rushing through it?

Adam: And one of the things you do need to include in your daily plan is downtime. If you can't have a day off, then you need to have an hour off. If you can't have an hour off, then you've got to have 15 minutes off, but you've got to have that free time that is just yours, where you don't have to do things.

I know it may sound crazy. I have a PhD. A lot of people say, "A PhD; he must be doing very high-minded stuff. You know, he's probably living with his books all the time."

No. I schedule in an hour or two every day to just kick back and watch TV and watch Netflix with my husband, and I schedule an hour every night to play a video game.

Why? 'Cause my brain needs that downtime.

And if you don't schedule in the downtime and if you try to cram in everything in your downtime, it's not going to work in the long run. It may work in the short run, but learning is not a sprint. Learning is a marathon. Learning is an Iron Man tournament. You can't do that in one day. You can't do that in one minute. You've got to be able to focus on: I'm in it for the long haul. I'm not just in it for this 400-yard dash.

Dinur: Something that I've just came to mind when Adam said, if you can't take a day off, take an hour off. If you care about doing well, be able to also do it half-assed, which is really weird to hear, but an hour off beats no time off. 30 minutes as a break beats absolutely no break.

Being able to have some downtime, like Adam said, lets you recharge the batteries. It helps you learn more efficiently, because now you're relaxed. You don't have to think about everything you're doing 100% of the time,

Adam: And one of the things that you can do for downtime, if you only have 30 minutes? Go get a cup of coffee. Go have a tea. Sit down and meditate. Listen to your favorite music on Spotify. Whatever it is, but you've got to carve out that time that is you time, every day. Because if you don't take care of you, no one else is going to.

Dinur: Now, the way teachers can use this is: you want to plan your preps. Use the 1, 3, 5 rule. You can get one big task, three medium tasks, and five small tasks done in one day. Pick the tasks that will move you closer to being prepped.

Adam: You also should plan your grading time. Again, use the 1, 3, 5 rule. So if you have a pile of papers that you've got to grade and then you've got a pile of homework assignments that you need to grade, and then you've got a pile of quizzes that need to be run through the Scantron, decide that you're going to do 10 of those 50 essays today. And then you're going to grade maybe 30 of the homework assignments. And you're going to run all those quizzes through the Scantron and record them.

But you've got to plan your grading time, because otherwise if you just say, "I'm going to grade now," that's kind of like students saying, "I'm going to study now." It's not specific. It doesn't say exactly what you're going to do. Using the 1, 3, 5 rule to identify the big tasks, the medium tasks, and the small tasks will help you enormously in making sure that grading doesn't eat your brain, eat your time, eat your calendar and eat your life.

And as we've told students, do the same thing for yourself. Give yourself a buffer. If you think that grading those five essay exams is going to take you an hour, then allow yourself an hour and a half and don't kick yourself. If you use up the whole buffer, it may allow you to recalibrate how long that actually takes to do it, right? So you could say, all right, if I have 30 essays to grade and I know that grading five of them takes me an

hour, then that's going to be a six hour task and I've got to break that up over a couple of days. I can't do that all in one day. By the end of the second hour, I'm going to be jibbering and going, I don't want to look at anything anymore! I don't want to grade anything! And you don't want to be in that mindset when you're grading.

I've had students ask me, "Dr. Sanford, when are you going to get our essays back to us or our papers back to us?"

And I've said, "Well, I've been in a crummy mood the last day, and I didn't want to grade while I was in a bad mood, because I know that that would leak over and I would be a total nitpicky angry - I don't want to do that to you."

And they go, "Wow, you arrange it that way?"

"Yeah. That's why I allow myself two weeks to get your papers done and you only turned them in yesterday, so you're lucky that I didn't start grading them yesterday because I was not in a good mood."

If you model that for your students, that also helps, because then your students will see: Dr. Jones, Mrs. Smith, they are taking the time to do it right. That means it's okay for me to take the time to do it right.

You don't even have to spell it out for them. You just have to model it for them. Like Dinur said, if a student comes to him and says, "I need a letter of recommendation" and he's got a pile of term papers to grade, he's going to say, "I can't do that right now," and he's going to tell them why: "I've got a pile of term papers to grade. That's my priority this week. I don't want to be in a place where I can't write a good letter of recommendation for you. So can you come back in two weeks? Can it wait that long? If not, I really recommend, did you find another professor, maybe a tenured professor, who can help you with that because right now I just don't have the time, I don't have the energy, and I wouldn't write a good letter."

Notice when you set this boundary with your students, you're also modeling to them how they can set boundaries with other people. They can set boundaries on their time, and their energy, and their effort.

Now students, here's how you can use this. Just like Dinur said to other teachers to plan their preps. Plan your homework, breakdown each thing you have to do in the steps of no more than one hour if you're in high school, or two hours if you're in college. If you know that that history paper is going to take you six hours, don't try to cram it into one study session.

Dinur: And again, focus on doing one thing at a time. Our society preaches multitasking. Adam and I preach the opposite. Monotask. Focus on one thing at a time. Bring all of your attention to the thing you're working on. Give it as much of your undivided focus and undivided attention, so that you can be proud of the finished product.

And that means that you need to give yourself time in order to do it well.

Rushing is not the same thing as learning to speed up your thought process. Rushing means you're being hasty, you're being impatient. It means that you're cutting corners where they should not be cut. To speed up your thought process means you've mastered the process, and feel comfortable using it more and more.

A good example of this comes from the music world. Jazz musicians improvise all the time, but they practice their improvisations, and they practice it slowly at first until they feel comfortable, and then, when they're performing, they know which improvisation they want to go with.

For Adam or for me, you're not going to write a dissertation or a book or a paper in one night, but you might feel comfortable writing a few pages in a day, maybe two or three pages. Or, if you want to focus on how many pages in a month, maybe do 15 pages a month, a page every other day. Essentially you're focusing on breaking up a big task into small, manageable chunks, and working on those chunks consistently,

Adam: So that's what we have for you in Episode 26.

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Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 27, when we'll discuss about how to work easier, not less.

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