



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

Episode 27: Work Easier, Not Less

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.

Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is episode 27, about setting yourself up to work easier, not less. Now what does that mean: work easier? Because for most people, they think of an "easier workload" as "a workload that doesn't have as much stuff in it." And when Dinur wrote this down as a suggestion for a topic, that's what I thought too. And I asked him, "What are you talking about: 'work easier but not less'?"

Dinur: And one of the things that I've noticed from my students is they would tend to leave their term projects, their term papers till the last week or two and that would make them really, really stressed out. And look, we can't eliminate all stress in class, but if we can help students reduce it, if we can make that stress be less there, that ultimately helps students learn. And ultimately if we're grading something, it's going to reflect. We're going to see better quality papers, better quality projects, because it's taking time to let learning actually happen.

Adam: And when he said this, I said, "Oh, so what you're talking about is smarter, not harder. Because a lot of students, when they try to work faster, they make it more difficult on themselves." So what we're talking about is slowing down. What we're talking about is making progress, not aiming for perfection.

And so for those two topics, we're going to refer you back to our episodes 3 and 16, but let's talk about how to actually do this. How are you supposed to set yourself up to work easier but not less? So we're going to talk about setup in this episode and then in episode 28, we're going to talk about how to actually put that into practice.

Dinur: And for a lot of students, workload and time are real, real issues. If you're a student, maybe you've got four or five classes. If you're an athlete, you've got time to practice, to travel to games to compete. Maybe you're working a part time or a full time job. Maybe you've got to take care of kids or other family members and your schedule is just packed. So what can you do?

Adam: Well, as we already mentioned, remember from episode 16, making progress is more important than being perfect, because perfect is a moving target. You'll never hit it. And we also talked about this in episode 3. Slowing down will make it more likely that you'll make that progress.

And of course I can hear you now: "Oh, that's easy for you to say, Adam, you don't have the workload I've got!"

And that's fair. But I did at one time. I, too, was an undergraduate. Dinur, too, was an undergraduate. We remember what this is like! And teachers, we know that you're also saying, "what about our workloads?"

We'll get to that.

Dinur: So let's actually talk about how to set yourself up to slow down and to work easier or to work smarter, not less.

Adam: Now, we've hammered on this before, but we're going to hammer on it again. You've got to plan your life. We've done a whole series on this - Episodes 12 through 16, that's our Time Management series. And so we're just going to pick out some important details from that series, in this case

First you've got to look over your course syllabus or your course outline on the first day of class. It is not just a stack of paper that your teacher printed out and handed to you. It's actually stuff that you need to know. Think of your syllabus as a guideline or as an instruction manual for the course. If you look at the syllabus, you'll be able to get a sense of how the assignments and the tests are laid out. What are you expected to do? How many are you expected to do? When are they due? These are all things that you should find out on day one of any course, right?

Dinur: Are your assignments daily, you know, in a math class. Are they weekly? Do you have to write a short paper every week for a class? Maybe some of your assignments are long term. Maybe there's a mix.

Are your assignments shorter, in terms of the length or pages you have to write? Are some papers more interesting to you based on the topic and vice versa. Are some assignments longer? Are they going to be more time consuming?

By looking at the syllabus your first day or two of classes, you're going to get a good sense for what each class demands and expects of you. You want to figure out if all your assignments are individual or if you're going to have group projects because those might be very different working processes and working schedules, depending on who you might work with. Maybe you've got a mix.

Adam: Look at how much reading you have to do. Look at how many videos you have to watch. Look at how many podcasts you have to listen to. How much time do you need to budget for that?

And I have to tell you, right now, if you have to watch a 20 minute video, budget more than 20 minutes, because you're probably going to need to watch it at least two times to get what you need out of it - maybe three times, to review it. So if you have a 20 minute video, plan for an hour. Not all at once, but plan for an hour of time spent looking at that video, watching that video, taking notes on that video.

Same thing for reading. You may need to estimate: how long does it actually take you to read something? Some students, all you do is skim, all right. And I understand the "bold and italicized word" method of studying.

I get it, but there's a lot more depth that you can get if you go beyond that. And there are some readings where you can't skim it, where you actually have to do an in-depth, deep dive on the reading, and that's going to take more time.

There was a writer - I want to say that they were at Grown and Flown, but don't quote me on that - who published something for college students and said, "look, the first day of class, you need to figure out: how long does it take me to read my history stuff? versus how long does it take me to read for English? versus how long does it take me to "do the reading" for my math class.

If you are a math whiz, maybe doing the reading for math doesn't take you very long. Maybe it takes you 20 minutes to read a four page assignment, all right, and then you've got it down. But if you aren't really good at fiction and you have to read a story or an essay or six poems or whatever, that might take you a longer time period, and you've got to plan for that.

If you aren't good with history, if you don't like having to read all those names and dates and it's boring to you and you know that when you get bored, your eyes glaze over, you're going to have to work against that. You're going to have to find ways to get around that.

So look at your reading. Look at your video watching. Look at the assignments and figure out "how long is that actually going to take me." Because your teacher has an estimate. But if you're a slow reader, it's going to take you longer.

Are there big assignments that you're going to have to break down into small pieces? We talked about this in our Time Management series as well. If you've got a research paper and it's a 20 page paper, you know that's gonna take some serious work, but it's also made up of a bunch of small pieces. And if you go back to our Time Management series - again, that's episodes 12 to 16 - and you listen to how to break down a big project into little bites. That will help immensely. But you've got to identify those assignments first.

So if you see "term project," let's say in a biology class. Anything that's labeled a "term project" or a "semester project" or an "end of quarter project" - or anything that's got the word "project?" Probably that's a bigger assignment than, say, an in-class reflection, okay?

So you want to look at which of these assignments are throwing out these big buzzwords that say, "Hey, I'm going to take more than a day. I'm going to take more than a week. You need to spend at least two months working on me, consistently."

Look for those assignments, and then check with the teacher. Put your hand up and say, "Dr. Sanford, you've got this research paper. How much time do you reasonably think a person should have to spend doing that?" And Dr. Sanford might come back and say, "That's probably a 20 hour project. That's probably going to take you about 20 hours, to really do it with the quality that I expect."

Okay. Now you know that's a four-week project.

Dinur: You want a plan handling your long-term assignments in small bites. Adam just mentioned, what if you're told that this term paper or this project is going to take 20 hours? You're not going to spend 20 hours the day before. You're not going to spend 10 hours a day the two nights before.

Adam: Well, you might if you don't follow our instructions, but... *laugh*

Dinur: *laugh* Yeah, but you don't want to do that.

And so one of the things that Adam and I recommend is that you remember to put due dates in your planner and on your calendar at the beginning of each term, and figure out what you need to do each week. Effectively, you're reverse engineering your final project. You're saying, "okay, here's when it's due. What do I want to have done the week before? What do I need two weeks before?" And work your way backwards.

If it's easier for you to start at the beginning and say, "okay, I've got this 20 page project, what do I want to write it about?" And break it down that way, and figure out the different components, and then spend a little time each day, go for it.

But in either case, you're taking a big project and you're breaking it down into small, manageable chunks and following through on these chunks in order to have a finished project that you're going to be proud of.

Forget, for a second, the grade. Forget, for a second, what your teacher's going to tell you. Are you proud of the work that you submitted? If you are, the hope is that you'll be proud of work that you invested time and you invested effort in.

I know that I didn't write my dissertation and one or two days. I'm willing to bet that Adam didn't write his dissertation in a day or two, either. A book isn't written in that sort of period of time, and, well, neither is a high quality term paper or project. Everything that looks big at the end is made up of a lot of small steps, but it's important that you're able to break down this big project and to small steps. That's part of the skills that you're developing in college.

Adam: And as they say, Rome wasn't built in a day. Now, many of us think, "oh, well, I'm smart or I'm good at this. I shouldn't have to take this long." Shouldn't is one of those words that says you're arguing with reality.

You may not feel like you should have to take that long, but if you want to produce quality work, it may be beneficial to take your time and do it right, instead of rushing and rushing and throwing it together at the end and turning in, basically, what isn't finished, hoping that you'll get some credit.

Now let's talk about how teachers can use this. Teachers, this is really beneficial in terms of reducing your workload, too. You've got a list of all the things you want your students to do over the course of the semester. You've created your syllabus. Take a day to go through your syllabus and create a sketch for yourself of what you expect them to have accomplished each week.

One of the things this will do is it will give your students a map, which is really, really helpful for a lot of students. But it will also point out to you if you are duplicating work, if you are creating too much work, if you're expecting too much - I know I've done this.

If you are setting your students up to fail because you are having them do 97 things in the course of four days, really think about it. Think about things like: when do school holidays happen? Is there some big event coming up that a lot of your students are going to be going to? Like, if you know that all your students are going to be going to that music festival that happens in September every year in your town, maybe it's not a good idea to assign for the weekend that the festival happens.

And just create a sketch to show yourself and your students: at the end of week three, this is what you should have finished, and this is how much time I expect you to have used on that project at this point.

If you are teaching a three-unit class, that's three hours in and six hours out of class, so show them how you expect them to use those six hours of outside of class time. That'll give them a sense of not only what you expect, but also critically how to accomplish it, because so many students, they look at this and they don't understand how to accomplish it. If you tell them, "I expect you to spend a couple of hours in this week making notes on the topic of your paper and going and finding six or seven sources about it," well, now they've got a plan. A lot of students don't know how to plan. So if you give them a sketch of "this is what I expect you to have done this week," they're more likely to get it done.

Dinur: At the beginning of the episode we gave the scenario that a student might be working a job, they might be playing sports for the school, they may have family obligations - and as teachers, it's on us to be flexible with our due dates based on our students' situations.

But at the same time, it's also on us to have clear boundaries and expectations. So, for example, one thing that I tell my students who work is: if there's something that goes on at work and it affects whether you can show up to class or whether it affects a due date for you, let me know as soon as possible and I'll work with you. You have to build in that little bit of flexibility, because we have dozens, if not hundreds, of students. We're not going to know everyone's obligations. We have an idea for how we set up our classes based on what we think is material that is relevant, that is important, and about how much time we expect to spend on the materials.

But we need to factor in that our students have lives of their own, outside of class. I know, surprising! But we need to take that into account. And one way we do that is by having clear lines of communication about what we expect from students, but also giving them that flexibility because our students, especially in college, our students are adults. That means they have adult obligations and responsibilities that are separate from the class that they're taking.

One thing to remember is we're all human, we're all people, and that means that life intervenes for all of us, generally in an unexpected way, and sometimes some flexibility in good communication from both parties. So this is on teachers, but it's also on students to keep those lines of communication open. Well, that goes a long way towards making this semester really successful for both students and teachers.

Adam: I was listening to a podcast the other day where Dan Harris was interviewing Brené Brown. It's on his 10% Happier podcast. And she was talking about some of her new work, and he said "what's come out of the new work?" And she said, "being clear is being kind."

And a lot of us conflate the idea of "kind" with "nice," and I want to dig into that for a moment, because it is relevant to this issue of flexibility and clarity. If you are trying to be nice, you're often not being clear.

So if I said to Dinur, oh, I don't know, "you know, Dinur, maybe it would be better if we schedule our recordings for, like, two in the morning, cause it's just kind of difficult when I just, I really don't like getting up that early, but I know that it's easier for you, but okay..."

Notice how this is not being clear, but if I say, "Dinur, I need to change our recording time, all right? I can't do this at nine o'clock in the morning anymore because I'm a night owl. Could we maybe set this up for the evenings?"

Notice how clear that is. Is it nice? Not usually. Is it kind? Yes. Because now Dinur knows what I expect. Now he knows what I can and can't do.

And in the same way, if you are clear with your students, they may say, “oh, she's a jerk” or “he's mean.” But if you're clear about it, they're less likely to say, “he didn't tell me what I needed to know.” If you tell your students ahead of time, “if you have a family emergency and you don't tell me, I can't help you at the end of the semester,” then you've put them on notice. You gotta be clear.

Now, here's the other thing about being clear. Students, if you feel shame, we can't fix that. If you're having shame about the thing that is keeping you from getting the job done in our class, and you don't tell us, we can't help you. You have to be clear with us, even if it's uncomfortable - maybe especially if it's uncomfortable.

I had a student one semester who became her family's sole breadwinner when her mother lost her job, but she didn't tell me until the last week of classes. She just stopped showing up to class. She stopped turning things in. And then she came to me in the last week of class and said, “Help me.”

I said, “I can't, you didn't tell me.”

“Well, I was ashamed, and anyway, you wouldn't have cared.”

How do you know? You will never know if the professor will listen to you unless you talk to them. Assuming that they won't guarantee that they won't, because you didn't let them.

So please be clear with your teachers about: “I have jury duty this week” or “my employer is sending me on a week long training in Mexico and I can't get out of it” or “my mom just went into the hospital, and I'm not sure that I can be in class the next week or so, 'cause they don't know what's happening, and she's my mom.” All of those are perfectly valid reasons for saying, “I need a little flexibility, Prof.”

But if you don't tell us, we don't know. And if you wait two, three, six weeks, we probably won't be able to help you at that point. You've got to tell us when it happens.

Now here's how students can set themselves up to work easier. For some students, the idea of planning sounds completely overwhelming. It sounds terrifying, but that's because you're already overwhelmed. Set yourself up the week before classes. Start at least get a sense of what you're going to need to do in given week first. Plan out your study times. Use your class schedule to identify blocks of time that you can use to study - and try to keep that to no more than two hours per study block, because even your brain, as young as it is, needs a break.

So if you know that you've got class from 11 to 12:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and then you've got a four-hour break? Spend two of those hours studying, and spend the other two hours getting lunch, spending time with friends, doing something to give your brain a break before you go to your class at 5:30. But don't try to do a four-hour study block. Don't try to cram. That's a great way to screw up the whole idea of working easier, not less.

Dinur: As soon as you get your syllabi, break down your big projects, set them up in your planner, set them up on your calendar, write down the due dates. That way you know what's coming up, and you don't get overwhelmed, because you've mapped it out for yourself. You've made your time visible. You know what you expect from yourself, and what your teachers expect of you.

Get a study group together your first week of classes, so that you have support and you have help when you're studying. A study group goes a long way in terms of not only covering material but keeping each other

accountable for keeping up with the assignments, because you can always ask something like, “so what have you guys done so far on this paper?” Or, “how did you do on this paper? What did you do well?” I don't know how many people are going to feel comfortable addressing what they didn't do well, so I'll focus on the positive and say, “how did it go? Did it go well? What you learn? What'd you get out of it?”

Adam: The other thing you can do, too, is bring your graded papers to your study group and say, “okay, it looks like he tends to really pick on people who don't check their spelling,” or “she really doesn't like it when people have run on sentences,” or whatever it is. You can identify your teacher's sort of “fingerprint annoyance points” and work with each other in the next paper or the next assignment to say, “hey, check for run on sentences. Remember she doesn't like those,” Or, “Hey, did you make sure that you're spelling they're there and their correctly. Did you check that? ‘Cause I know you had problems last time.”

The idea is to get some accountability going, and to get some support, because having someone to be accountable is often a form of support and we're actually going to talk about that in episode 28.

Dinur: Figure out the number of classes you can recently take in a given quarter, or given semester, without overwhelming yourself. If you're working a full-time job, that's 40 hours of your week gone right there. If you're trying to take a full time class load, that's another 40 hours gone, because a full-time class load might look like it's only three hours or four hours a week, but that's in class. You're expected to devote two to three hours a week outside of class, as well.

Adam: And you still need to sleep, you know. You still need to eat. You still need to work out. You still need to spend time with your friends. You still need to spend time with your family members. Use those 168 hours a week wisely.

So that's what we have for you in Episode 27! Now, if you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends. We are always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Android. We're hosted on blubrry.com. Also, we'd really appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 28, when Adam and I talked about how to put your plans into action and actually work easier in your classes.

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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.