



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

Episode 36: About Attendance

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 36: Why Are Some Professors So Strict About Attendance?

Dinur: You're in college. You finally get to choose your own schedule, and for the first time (if you're a first year student), you are no longer legally required to be in class every day. There's no truancy law. You're an adult. So you should be free to attend classes as regularly or as sparsely as you wish.

So why should you go to class?

Adam: Well, there's several good reasons to make sure that you're in class. The first one is how much it costs you. The second one is legal requirements that the school has to obey, and the educational requirements of the class may make it so that, if you're not in class, there's no way to catch it up. So we'll go into each of these things here.

Dinur: So the first point Adam brought up is money. Financially, it is **absolutely** worth it for you to attend class, and it's worth it for you in several ways.

Think about how much money you spend on tuition for a semester. Think about how many classes you're taking that semester. Divide your tuition by the number of class meetings, your lectures, your sections, labs, and consider that every time you miss a class, you've paid for nothing.

Adam: So here's an example, and I'm probably lowballing it here, but these numbers are basically for "ease of math." Let's say that your tuition is \$5,000 for one semester. And let's say that the semester is 15 weeks long, and you're taking four classes. And let's also say that each of your classes meets two times a week. So you have 30 meetings in a semester.

All right. If you have four classes, dividing \$5,000 of tuition means that each class is costing you \$1,250 a semester. Now take that \$1,250 and divide it by 30 class meetings. That's \$41.67 per class meeting. That's how much you're paying. That's about the equivalent of dinner and a movie in most parts of the United States. So you want to waste that by not showing up to class? And of course if your tuition is higher, that could go as high as maybe a concert ticket. That's a lot of money to be wasting just to not come to class!

Dinur: Now, as an instructor, I encourage my students to take a day off from class if they need to recharge their batteries. Sometimes it's a long semester, right? Adam said it's 15 weeks. At some point you sometimes hit a wall and you need that day to just rest and hit the reset button, recharge a little bit. But that said, I do not recommend extended absences, both because of the money that you're spending on classes and because you're missing out on a really key part of learning.

One thing that you may not think about is there's a lot of learning that happens when you have to think about material in real time and talk about it both with your peers and with your professor. And so, for my students, if there's an extended absence on the horizon - someone gets sick, there's a surgery coming up, or you have to attend a funeral and you need to grieve - let your professors know as soon as possible, so that we can work with you on keeping you up to speed with material that you'll likely miss during that absence.

But also make sure that you have contact information for at least two or three classmates, so that you can get notes from them for the days that you miss, because - I think we've mentioned in previous episodes, I'll post my slides for students, but those slides aren't going to cover absolutely everything that we discuss in class that day. And so if you only review those slides, you don't know what part you're missing.

Adam: Now, Dinur and I have both had experiences with this situation. I know I've mentioned the student last semester who had to suddenly take over providing for the family. This semester I had a student come to me after missing six or seven days of class. Now, granted, we're only in the sixth or seventh week of the semester, but that's a lot of class to miss! And it turns out that they were also dealing with a family situation, and they had to put their family in front of their schooling.

But it's really not a good idea to just miss class for four weeks and then suddenly come back and say, "Hey, so I missed class for four weeks. What did I miss?" Don't do that, all right?

If you know you're going to have to miss class, or if you're presented with a situation where you're not sure how long it's going to be - Dinur mentioned an illness - so let's say that your parent has just gone into the hospital, and they are taking chemo, and they can't get out of the hospital, and now all of a sudden it's on you to take care of all the things that they were taking care of, whether that's family income or maintaining the household with your younger siblings or whatever it is? Let us know as soon as possible. Don't wait until the crisis is over, because by then who knows what you might've missed? You might've missed exams, you might've missed important group work, you might've missed things that can't be made up. And so, you've got to let us know early, because if you don't let us know early, we may not be able to help you by the time you come back.

Dinur: Well, one of the things that comes to mind for me, as far as a student with an extended absence, was I've had students who worked full time, or worked at least extended part time hours outside of school, and I've had students who missed a few weeks because of a change in their work schedule, but they didn't tell me until weeks after. And when you're telling your professor, "Hey, I've just missed several weeks because of work," that doesn't make you sound responsible. It makes it sound like you're making something up on the spot and trying to make yourself look good.

Whereas if you email me, if you're one of my students and you email me early when that change happens and say, "Hey, something came up at work, I'm not able to get out of it. Can you work with me?" Well, I'm a lot more flexible at that point, because I'm more aware of your situation as it's happening, and I can try and help you figure out what needs to be done, so that you don't fall behind in my class.

Adam: Yeah. I had a student a couple semesters ago, I was teaching an evening class that met once a week, starting at 5:00 PM. And so we had two classes' worth of time in that evening class because we didn't get out until like eight something. I had a student who would always show up in the second half of class but was never there for the first half of class. And I finally had to take that student aside and say, "Look, you are failing. You have missed one of every two classes."

And they're all, "But I'm here for part of the class!"

And I said, "Right, but you're not here for the first part of the class. You're missing a lecture. You're missing the activity. You're missing the discussion."

Well, it turned out that they were working for a job that routinely would tell them, "Oh, you have to work another hour of overtime before you can leave." And they had planned their work schedule so that they would get off at 4:30, be able to be on campus - I think the class actually started at 5:30 - so they had an hour to get from job to campus and get into our classroom, and it never happened because their boss kept saying, "Nope, you gotta work overtime today. Nope, you've got to work overtime today."

So what we wound up doing was I had the student do some independent work to make up for the missed classes, but I also wrote a very sternly worded letter to the student, which they asked me to do. I sent them a very sternly worded email saying, "If you miss any more classes, you cannot move forward in this class because you have missed too much."

Basically they told me "I've got to have something I could show to my boss and if he sees something signed Dr. So-and-So, he'll respect that." All of a sudden the student was able to come to class without a problem for the rest of the semester. Why? Because apparently their boss was scared of me, because when you write an email and you say, okay "sincerely, Dr. Sanford," apparently, I scared their boss.

So teachers, you know, work with the student. If you need to pressure their boss to make them not give them overtime for awhile so they can be in class on time, then do that. But students, if you don't ask for help, we can't help you. So I just really need to put that out there.

Dinur: Because remember there are hundreds of students for each professor and we do not know each of your specific work situations or life situations, if you don't make us aware, we have no way of knowing and we are going to be able to keep track of what's happening for everyone.

Adam: Mm-hmm. Now that moves us onto the second part of what we were talking about. The second issue is money. And another way that money is part of the equation here is that if you fail a class, then one question that we're legally required to answer when we file your failing grade is to answer, "When's the last day the student was present in class?"

And this is done for financial aid purposes: Miss too many class sessions and you don't get funding. So, showing up to class both puts the money you've paid to good use, and it allows you to keep your financial aid. So quite literally showing up to class can pay off for you, in multiple ways.

That was one of the things that startled me when I started filing grades at my current institution, is, I would put in, okay, "this student is getting an F" or "they're getting a W," right, because they just stopped showing up to class. Right. I had to put in "when's the last day they were there?" Well, the only way I can do that is if I take attendance.

So it may seem really picky that your professor either hands around a sign in sheet, or calls roll every day, or, in my case, the opening quiz serves as the attendance, but I still call roll randomly three times during the semester because there will be students who log into the quiz, take the quiz and claim that they were there. So I actually count noses every time I get the quiz up. I'll see that 34 students have logged in, so I count and if I only see 32 students in the room, then I call roll right after I close the quiz. And if I catch somebody telling me they were there when they weren't well then we're going to talk with Academic Affairs.

It may seem like it's really trivial, picky stuff from your professor, but we're also operating under institutional requirements from the university, saying "You have to know when students were in your class and when they weren't. You have to know the last day they attended." The only way we can do that is if we take roll

Dinur: And that goes, I think you said for W's, it, for our institution we called them WUs, for unauthorized withdrawals.

Adam: Right.

Dinur: Whereas the W is something authorized, where they've gone through the office. But just like Adam, when I've had to file WUs one of the questions that I got - and I was not expecting it as an instructor, was - "when was the last time that student showed up?" So I have to look and see when's the last time that I have a record of them participating by asking or answering questions. And if I don't have that then I've got to look at the last assignment or the last test they went off. And that test or assignment might have been before they stopped showing up. But that's the last record I have of them. If you don't show up, there's no way I can vouch for you. I cannot say this person kept showing up if I don't have something to go off of.

Adam: And that's one of the reasons that a lot of us take roll, or hand out a sign in sheet, and why you will get in trouble if you have somebody sign you in on the sign in sheet on a day that you're not there. Or, if you use for example the online quiz that I use and you say you're there when you're not.

So we are under some pressure too, to make sure that you're not lying to us. And I hate saying that because it makes it sound like we think you're lying to us, but there will always be somebody who is trying to get away with it and we have to be able to say, "Uh-uh. No. You weren't there that day. We need to talk." And so whenever I find out that a student filled in the quiz but it was not in class, if they don't show up within the next couple of minutes after class starts, they get a nasty email from me saying, "You need to explain to me why you filled out this quiz and said you were in class when you weren't."

And occasionally those students will actually have been trying to play games. Often it's the student who was, they were walking into class and they got distracted; or they were trying to drive to campus and they were taking the quiz on their phone while they were driving, which is not safe. And you know, and so, students, if you have to be late, just let us know, all right? Like, I had one time I came into class and only about 12 of my

students - this is like four years ago - only about 12 of my 39 students were even taking the quiz. And I normally open it up about 10 minutes before class starts, so they have about 15 minutes to answer five questions, and then I use their response on the quiz - just that the fact they responded is "okay, they're present."

And I'm looking at this and going, only 12 people are logged in and there's only like nine people in the room.

And I said, "Is there something I should know? Cause normally by this time we have like 25 people in this room. "

And one student said, "Uh, yeah, a tanker truck crashed on the 405, and everything coming north on the 405 is totally blocked off."

And I said, "Oh, okay." Because, you know, I can't hold students responsible for that.

So like we've said, if there is an emergency that you had no control over, let us know that. Because as it turned out, I was teaching about 12 students that day because most of them were coming up that freeway and it was totally blocked off, and all the ways to get out of the freeway were totally blocked off. And it was during morning rush hour. So you can just imagine how bad that was.

And so, for that one I just had to basically excuse all the people who weren't there, 'cause none of them had control over that. But that's unusual, all right?

We still have to know when you're in class. As professors, we are required - as employees of the university, that's one of our jobs is to report back to the registrar: "Well, the last day the student was in my class was March 14th, and I haven't seen him since."

Dinur: Now, my students sometimes ask me why we care about attendance and you've heard some of the reasons that Adam and I, and other professors care.

Now, not all of your professors grade on attendance. I grade my students based on how actively they participate in class. But without being present in class, it's hard or impossible to participate on a particular day. I won't take points away from a student for being absent. I don't lower a grade, because I'd really rather work with students who are engaged that day, who are ready to put in that effort and who want to discuss the material.

And personally, I would rather a student stay home if they need that day off because they're not feeling well. I don't want to get sick. Your classmates don't want to get sick. And if it's a different kind of illness or a different kind of discomfort, take that time, start feeling better, come when you're ready to put that effort in. And sometimes students have, you know, other tests or other projects or other papers other than my class, and they need that time to put the finishing touches or to review. And you know what? That's fine. You need that focus. Then obviously I know that the focus would not be on my material. I would rather you focus and take care of what you need to take care of to be successful. So that's the next time we meet, you're there, and you're ready to rock and roll.

Adam: Right? We don't want you writing your essay for the next class in your, you know, while you're trying to do the work in our class, or ignoring our work and writing your essay. Just stay home and write your essay, if that's what you have to do. But ideally, you know, plan your day so that that doesn't happen very often.

Everybody needs a mental health day. I allow myself one mental health day. I rarely use it, but if a student emails me and says, "Dr. Sanford, I'm just overwhelmed," I'm all, "Take your mental health day, you get a mental health day, it's fine."

And we know that life happens. Sometimes your car doesn't start, or like the scenario I described, where an oil tanker has fallen over on the freeway and you can't get there, or maybe you have to take your mom to the hospital. We understand that stuff.

Now I on the other hand, I do tie grades to being in the class, in a way. If you're not there then you don't get any credit for the in class activity that we did that day and the reason I do this is because my classes are intense and a lot of my students need a lot of in depth explanation that goes beyond the basic "here is information you need to know" kind of lecture. If you're not in class, as Dinur said, it's really difficult to get the benefit of that help if you're not in class.

Now, of course if you have a medical or emergency reason for not being in class, I work it out with you. But it's important that you're present in the class, because every missed class is missed material and missed discussion. And also, in my classes at least, what we learn on Thursday often ties directly to what we learned on Tuesday. So if you miss a class, you're missing that foundation.

Now, are there times when we professors would love to skip class? Of course. We're human. Everyone has a day, like Dinur said, when you just, you have to stay home. You're overwhelmed or you're overcommitted. But be aware that you are not showing up doesn't hurt us, it just hurts you. And we really want to avoid that if we can.

Most professors - I will say "most" because I know that there are some professors who don't fit this description - but most professors have zero interest in our students failing. It just makes it really hard for us to help you if you're not there.

Dinur: And for the most part, we love having students in class, because without students we can't teach. And there's - Adam and I have discussed in previous episodes - we do not, and I'm repeating this, **do not** expect students to know material perfectly.

Mistakes are actually a very good thing, because they let us as teachers know what material we need to cover more thoroughly. We can see what's more confusing, and hopefully mistakes allow for learning to happen.

Now all I ask from my students is that they give me the best effort they can when they're in my classroom. Some days that best is going to be at a higher level than others, but without showing up consistently, I cannot see what a student's best effort is, and that makes it harder for me to see whether a student is really learning or not.

Adam: Now it's easy to assume that your professor is just being unreasonable when they require you to show up for class, 'cause you've got a busy life and you're an adult. Why should it matter so much if you miss a few days of class? Well as we've already mentioned in other episodes, that's where a lot of the real learning happens, and it's the only place we can really help you with that process.

Dinur: Now, in my lectures, I tend to throw a lot of questions at my students, and I try and encourage my students to work with material as they learn it. So learning in real time, whether that's answering my questions directly, whether that's talking to a partner or getting together in small groups to discuss questions, it's a way

for them to engage and interact with material in real time. And if a student misses a lecture, they might have most of the information from lecture available, because I'll post my slides online. But that also means that they miss out seeing how this material connects to previous course material, and they might miss out on conversations with their peers about the material.

Because when I design my classes, I try and structure it so that material builds and builds and builds. And if you don't - if you miss class consistently, you're missing part of your foundation, and you're missing part of what we've built on top of it. So I encourage attendance and participation, because the more you, as students, interact with material, the more you learn. And if learning is interacting with material in different ways, than the student reading the slides interacts with material one way, but misses out on discussions and explanation. So you're missing out on speaking about it. You're missing out on hearing the material, and that, and you might be at a comparative deficit compared to your classmates. You've got surface learning, but nothing deeper than that, because you're not engaging all of your learning senses.

Adam: And this goes back to our Episode 20 with Gretchen Wagner where she talks about the study senses, where it's really important that not everything is just about looking at it, that you also talk about it, that you also hear about it, that you also interact with the material and manipulate it and move it in new ways.

Now as for me, the way my classes are structured is that the first 15 or 20 minutes is explanation of things that students are having trouble with, based on the quiz they just took. And then the rest of the class is given over to group work, to the in-class activities that are based on applying what they've just learned from the lecture they've watched the day before. And then at the end, I take any new questions that have come up so that everyone's got the answers they need to move forward with their learning. So for me, this creates an ideal situation for getting help from the professor, because I'm right there in the room with you. Trying to struggle through it at home without help? I would say skipping class is gonna make your life so much more difficult.

Dinur: Now, this episode has been geared mostly towards students and why it's a good idea for students to show up to class.

But how teachers can use this is first of all, think about why you require your students to be in class. Is it to get questions answered? Is it to get some initial exposure to new information? if you're used to just lecturing for the entire class period, think about how you can engage students in a way that isn't just communicating this initial exposure to the info you need them to learn. Have them answer questions in class. Have them work in small groups. Have them do something so that it breaks up that time, and it's not just one voice talking at them for an hour or an hour and a half

Adam: Because it's really easy as a student, and I know this from experience and I've had students tell me they zone out. You're talking at them for 45 minutes, for an hour, for an hour and 15 minutes. There is no way that anybody can keep that kind of sustained attention the whole time. And so, really think about why you need them to be in class. If it's just to get that information, they could do that by reading the book, right?

So you need to think about other ways to use that in-class time so that it's not something that can easily be done outside of class. I mean, make it something that can be made up, but don't make it something where you could just swap out reading the book and whatever you're doing in class could be covered by reading the book, because if that's all they would need to do to understand the same amount of information, or get the same amount of information, what's the point of being in class?

Now, the second thing, and I kind of alluded to this a minute ago, think about how to gauge the effect of missing class and really communicate that to your students. Now in some states it's illegal to grade directly for attendance. You can't grade them on being there or not being there. What you can do is grade on participation. Dinur grades how often his students speak up and interact; I grade them on being present for the in class activity. And either way works.

What you need to be able to do is tell the students, look, "If you don't show up for this class, you miss the activity. The activity is where you're going to interact more deeply with the information. It's where you're going to find out the things you really don't know. So you can ask any questions before you leave. And if you're not here, there's no way to recreate that by giving you an assignment. There really isn't."

And so if you can think about how to gauge the effect of missing class, and tell your students "Missing class means these consequences for you, you won't be able to do this and this and this, these are things you'll miss out on, and that's more likely to make your grade on tests go down. It's more likely to make your grade on papers go down."

Tie it to their grades in a way that will make it meaningful. Either way will work, you know, depending on whether it's participation or being present. But if you're going to grade them only on being present, also make sure that it's being present for something that is not attendance. So for me it's the in-class activities.

Dinur: And one other way that you can gauge participation or attendance is, you can ask your students questions, have them present on the material in class, or have them give feedback on an activity in an anonymous way, like on a Google Form and comment on what you see in terms of responses on the Google form. Something like: "Group one, you're close on this but you're missing a little something. Group two, I have no idea where you're coming from, but I think you've got to look at something - something different. Group three, nice job," uh, and so on.

Adam: But even then, make it even more anonymous. So the way, and this is from how I do my in class activities. So, I give them an issue to talk about and five questions to answer, and the five questions are always applying what they have just learned in the lecture that they would have watched the day before the reading they would have done the day before. And so I say, "All right, so we're going to pick an event. Sometimes we pick an event, sometimes I create a vignette for them to read. And then I say, all right, uh, for example, in my intro class, they have just learned the three main theoretical perspectives of sociology. So conflict theory, functionalist theory and symbolic interactionism. And so I gave them a handout, one per group, and I gave them a vignette that was basically a couple of guys complaining in their factory, you know, lunch room about their jobs and about how management doesn't care about us and how we've got all these dangers, and then they get fired.

And I asked them to analyze it. So question one is "What would functionalists think is important here and why?" Then question two is "Okay, what would conflict theorists think is important and why?" and so forth. And then the last question is give me three insights that your group gained from doing this exercise.

They turn it in on a Google form. So I start getting the Google Form information like five to 10 minutes before class ends. And I tell them, "okay, whatever you haven't done -" like at five minutes before the class was over, I say, "okay, any form part that you didn't finish, put N/a and submit it, 'cause I need to see your responses."

Well, then I can go through their responses and say, okay so "the group that said this -" not even "group one", but "the group that said this," because I don't know which group is turning it in - I don't have them identify

themselves as all. And so I say, “the group that said this, uh..... no, I hate to tell you that, but you really, you need to go back and review these five things about conflict theory because that totally is not what conflict theory says. Now the groups that said this and this and this, you guys are pretty good. You're pretty on key. The group that said this, um, you're in the ballpark but you're way back and right field. So you need to kind of come toward the infield. Look at this and this.”

Notice that I don't know anything about who said any of those things. I am completely unaware, intentionally, that, you know, I don't know which students said this. I don't know which group said this. That allows the students to be a lot more free with being able to take chances, with being willing to make mistakes, because they know that they're not going to get like pointed out. I'm not going to point at that group and say, “Dinur's group is really stupid.” You know, I won't do that. They don't have to worry about that.

And so you could ask them questions, and have them discuss it for five minutes, and then have them turn it in in a way that you won't know who turned into the questions, but you know who was there. So you can give them credit for being there. That's their participation points.

And Dinur, I'm sure you have a way to handle, uh, participation for students who are really shy.

Dinur: Absolutely.

Adam: We have them, you know, send in an email or something.

Dinur: Exactly. So, for my students who are afraid of making mistakes in front of their peers, I have them email me that evening about what they really thought about from that day's lecture or any questions or comments that they had. Because if they emailed me that evening, there's a good chance I'm going to remember what we talked about in class. Whereas, if they're waiting a day or two after, well, by that point I've taught a different set of students, a different set of classes, and I might not remember specifically what I'd lectured on the day before.

Adam: Right.

Dinur: So that lets me know, okay, this student was there that day. I remember we talked about this and yeah, I could see where they're confused and I'll email a response or, okay, they've made a couple of good observations. I'll include their participation, I'll up their score on that.

So, that's what we have for you in episode 36. 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 more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 37, when Dinur and I are going to talk about one of the biggest questions for graduating seniors: how do you apply to graduate school?

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Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!