



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

Episode 40: An Interview With Professor Thomas Norman

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 and how we teach and how they overlap.

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is episode 40, where Dinur and I are going to interview Professor Thomas Norman of CSU Dominguez Hills about his ultimate goals, one of which is to create the best applied business administration program in Southern California. So, hi, Tom. How're you doing?

Professor Norman: Great, Adam.

Dinur: Happy to meet you, man.

Professor Norman: Nice to meet you as well.

Adam: So I asked Tom to be on the podcast after he was very forceful about some of his ideas about how to make sure that what students learn at college goes beyond college, that when they get into the business world they actually have some use of that information that they took away from his classes. And I said, "you know, I've got a podcast..." and so, now, here we are.

So when we were chatting the other day, Tom, I wanted to ask you first about this program that you've been building because you were very specific to say you wanted it to be an applied business administration program, not just a business admin program. And I'd like to know, what does that mean to you?

Professor Norman: Great question! What it means to me is, we need to turn out business leaders, and we need to develop management skills, not just management knowledge. Too many professors think that their job is to lecture, and if students, observe - you know, absorb - that information and can spit it back on a multiple choice test, they've done their job. Okay. I would consider that a huge failure.

I do have some multiple choice tests, but they count towards 20% of the grade, and I use those just as an indication to see what percentage of the content they're mastering if they would actually sit for an exam like the CPA exam or the Professional in HR exam, where they would need to hit a standard of 70% to, to do fine. And

in my class you can get a 70% on the midterm and the final and still get an A in the course because 80% of your grade is practicing the much harder skill of managing people.

How do you conduct an interview? How do you sit down and look somebody in the eyes and determine is it this person? Person number three, person number seven? Who will be the best fit for the job our organization needs to do and the culture we have at our organization?

And so my class is taught in an active learning classroom, where 60 or more percent of the time should be spent doing job interviews, mock interviews, practicing. You're the interviewer for five minutes, then you're the interviewee for five minutes.

Then let's stop and reflect. How did that feel? What did I do well? Did I set a warm and inviting tone? The interview you might want to work for me. Um, maybe I was very good at that, but then when I come around and ask, did you collect enough information to convince me, your pretend manager in this scenario, that we should hire Adam, or Dinur, or somebody else, and why? Right? How can you connect what you learned in this conversation to our job description?

And, and that goes beyond a multiple choice test of simply asking "what are legal questions" or "illegal questions?" And to be honest, that's the type of training I received here at CSU. It's a training many people have received and other businesses where I've worked. Um, you know, that's, that's a good first step. But that does not lead to you being a successful manager.

And when I benchmark what people do at some of our supposedly more prestigious options, your UCLAs or USCs, there isn't the same focus and attention to teaching, and really getting to know your students - in those large classrooms that I hear can be hundreds of students - as we can, uh, do at Dominguez Hills, which is why, for my 12 years in the academy, I've stayed at Dominguez Hills.

I choose every year to come back, because we are committed to being great at teaching. I do research too, and I have a couple of articles on interviewing and teaching interviewing. So I like to show the community that I am respected by peers. But more importantly, to me, is those two or three students that email me at the every end of every semester saying, "Hey, I got a job and something I did in your class helped me ace that interview, And it's now helping me on the job."

Adam: Those are just the best letters!

Dinur: And it seems like you focus a lot of really, like, practical hands-on kind of skills when you're telling students "we want you to practice being an interviewer" and then practice interviewing, because you realize that, if nothing else, students will need to know how to interview and be ready for these sorts of questions.

Professor Norman: Exactly. My first class, you know, that I teach is Principles of Management. And so anybody in that class should be expected to be a manager someday. Even if they're, you know, an art director or a musician. There's a management component, right? So they might be an artist. I want them to negotiate well with their managers so they don't fall victim, like Elvis or - name your celebrity who got cheated by a manager, right? In a sense, you might have to manage yourself if you're a one-person show. And I don't want my students to be taken advantage of.

The neat thing about the interviewing project is I've turned that into a large-scale service-learning project that benefits a thousand people in the South Bay. We go to the Torrance Regional Occupational Center, and 80 of

our HR students who take the second course, right? We want to build this, they get a little practice in my course, then in HRM 313, we spent a lot more time on interviewing, and then we send them out and they volunteer three hours, uh, to help people training to be a pet groomer, maybe a welder. Uh, these are jobs where they're getting either a semester to two semesters of training to go out and join the world of work. But they are high school students or recent high school graduates who have no interviewing experience.

So our Dominguez Hills students are really learning what it's like to be a good interviewer, because they will conduct 10 to 20 interviews during that three-hour period, and they will get direct feedback from strangers they've never met on: how good are they at coaching people? How good are they at dealing with that introverted welding student who doesn't want to be there, who wants to just answer every question "Yes, no, uh, I don't know."

And actually use the probing question, build rapport, so that that person gets a little bit better. And then my students understand, "wow, this, this type of candidate" - and we find this a lot with the trades. We find this, to be honest, a lot more with some of the younger male students and the female students there. There are different ways of finessing that to get the best out of somebody in a way that - you know, we teach, we aren't discriminating on these bases, but we're trying to be, to anticipate differences so you can help everybody put their best foot forward. Because often those - the shy introverts are going to be fantastic employees, and they need that time to practice and get comfortable with somebody maybe closer in age to them, doing this three times, so when they sit before that interviewer, they don't just blow it.

Adam: Well, you make me think of, you know, how many times I wish that someone, like you had trained people who'd interviewed me. Because as an autistic person, I mean, I may be extroverted, but I'm not especially good at interviewing, because it requires so much understanding of things like body language and tone, and these are things that are completely invisible to me. And so, um, when you have that shy welding student, you know, who is interviewing for the job, how do you tell your management students, "okay, if they're introverted, don't automatically assume they're not good at what they do just because they don't talk much." Is there a way to get, maybe, the more extroverted students to understand that it's not about personality so much as it is about skill set?

Professor Norman: Yeah.

Adam: Is there a way to do that?

Professor Norman: We try to work on something that I myself had to work on as a young manager - and I still get feedback I could work on it more from people like my wife: listening. Right?

When you're an interviewer, and you're an extrovert, your job isn't to talk. You have a script, a set of questions. I teach them to use structured questions so it's fair, and they're often behaviorally based, and you're asking people to tell stories about a time when they did something. When you use this format, it helps people on the spectrum. It helps introverts. It helps people to realize that that interview that you maybe thought you didn't do well at - I would suspect 80% of the blame goes to the interviewer.

Adam: Mmmm.

Professor Norman: Very few interviewers - I've worked at top companies, Wells Fargo, Sun Microsystems - I've then sent out the interview. I was never trained to do this, right? And we often, like professors do it like we saw - it doesn't mean it's the best. So we work in class, and this is how it becomes a service learning course.

They spend 10 hours, 12 hours practicing, because the extroverts sometimes need the most training. Just like I did. I will sit and observe them saying, "Talk less. Listen more. Right? You have two ears, one mouth."

And it's easier for me to deliver that message, thinking I can talk about times when I failed. And really, the secret, it's getting people to tell stories about themselves. And almost everybody can do that. I mean, there are some painfully shy people who just really struggle, but if you reframe it, so it's not a "gotcha interview" - it's not like the famous McKinsey interview where you ask somebody, "how many ping pong balls?" This question, I remember being asked, "how many ping pong balls would it take to fill this room?" You know - start calculating right now in front of me. Oh, that's an incredibly high stress. Right?

And McKinsey has millions of applicants; they, I guess they can do that type of stuff. But for your average city, county job, you know, somebody looking to be an underwater welder - it, the job is to find competent people. And some of the questions we had is "tell me about your favorite class." "Tell me about an award you received" or just "tell me about a time you felt proud of work you did."

And everybody should be able to express a favorite, talk about something that they're proud of. And the one bit of coaching we do have to do, because I know that these students will face it and my students will face it - we start with a hard icebreaker. And it shouldn't be hard, but it is: "Tell me about yourself."

Adam: Ooh, yeah. That's one of the ones where when you put - that feels like a "being put on the spot" kind of thing. Because then the question is, it's so broad. I mean that's - as an autistic, my response back would be, "What do you want me to talk about? What specific thing? Give me something specific." And that, in and of itself, would probably give the interviewer some information, like, "this guy does not like broad-spectrum questions with no guidelines," right?

Professor Norman: Yes, yes. And so that's why it's important that these students do three, because that's one of the most common interview questions, and they're going to face it. And your response back, "what do you want to know more about?" is perfect.

Because here's what we often hear. They might hear from a younger person, "Oh, you know, I'm Brittany and I'm dating this new guy, and I'm really having fun, you know, he's on the football team."

We teach our students to immediately stop that conversation: "Let me just interrupt you there on that. That's wonderful. I want you to know we're committed to being an equal employment opportunity employer, and could you reframe that? Tell me about yourself and something more related to this job and more related to my organization."

And so that's where it is a coaching session. And then we hope, in interview two or three, it becomes more real. So in a sense we're also doing management development, right? I'm teaching my students to be a coach and to have the confidence - and some of my students can't pull it off. They can't interrupt somebody.

But the other thing I haven't shared is that I do get to stand behind almost everybody one time, and then I'll debrief what I saw. And then that's that third level. And I recruit HR experts to have other people who are recruiting, you know, have recruited for 20 years, sit behind students, observe and then coach.

Occasionally, we'll jump in if it's a total disaster, but with, you know, love in our hearts, trying to say, "let's just let us show you how to do it." And for some of my less confident students, I'll even let them observe me do an interview to help them get to their confidence. 'Cause again, we don't want to do a "gotcha". We want to help

people turn that “tell me about yourself” into - and I do warn them right before it starts, that they should get out their notepaper while they're waiting for their interview, and they should write their answer to that question, and they should practice that and just have their elevator pitch, right? So I try to explain, “you've already heard about elevator pitches. Most of you hopefully have worked on your 30-second pitch telling me about yourself. You go into your elevator pitch and then you could add that follow on, right? ‘Is that what you wanted to hear about,’ right? Or you could start the elevator pitch, if you have multiple pitches, depending on your approach.”

Adam: So how do you bring this into - and I know that this is adaptive learning and service learning and you're having them practice what they're going to do out in the real world - and one of the things that Dinur and I are always looking for are ways to make learning easier. And so, you mentioned a couple of specific things that weren't interview-related that were maybe more tied to what you do in the classroom. Like what are, many of our listeners are teachers or they are undergrad students. And so what we want to do is, kind of give them some pointers for, okay, how do you bring these management principles, these, you know, this understanding of how to get a job into, say, a history class or a sociology class or a math class. You know, let's say that you've got a student who's an undergrad, who is majoring in engineering, and he wants to get a job as an engineer. What kinds of things would you suggest that they do to bring that to an interview? You know, what - you know, from their schoolwork, and I know we've talked about this in the past.

Professor Norman: Great question. I encourage students to be developing a portfolio, an online portfolio; that they should have a hyperlinked resume if they're an engineering student and they have a project or code that they're really proud of. And this was verified with the vice presidents of AEG, just a few weeks ago, saying that as they're hiring IT folks, they want to look at the code. They don't care about the interview, they want to see the code and look at it and use that to make their decision. They've been using that type of evidence to hire their last couple of IT employees that, you know, kind of entry level positions and, and so for the engineer, uh, that could be very easy. They should have projects, and they should be spending maybe a little bit more time in our classes doing a good job of that project - not to please the professor, but to showcase to the world, here's what I can do! Right? That, that they need to sell them.

I think the history student seems a little bit more of a challenge, but history students should be writing. So they shouldn't be writing to satisfy - and you know, they should be satisfying themselves and the community, somebody should benefit from the research they're doing. And that's a hard, hard thing to communicate to my students, and I don't do it successfully with all of them, or maybe even half of them, but I, I do try to do it with more, now than I did 10, 12 years ago, Because they often approach writing assignments of “what font, how many pages,” which aren't the right questions.”

Dinur: Right? They're looking at the bare minimum guidelines. They're not looking at the substantive issues here.

Professor Norman: Exactly.

Adam: And structure, more than content. I - do you know about, I believe her name is Marianne Winkelmes at University of Nevada Las Vegas? She spoke at Dominguez a few years ago, and she talked about the transparent assignment sheet and she made us all look at an assignment sheet. And the only real guideline was “five pages, 12 point font, you know, one inch margins, double space,” but nothing about how to do this assignment. Nothing about what the expectations were. Nothing about what, you know, how to judge your finished work and see, is this what we want? And I was so, you know, I was, I caught on fire from that and I've been doing transparent ever since.

I had a conversation recently with a colleague about our different views of how to, how to structure an assignment. And I, and I think part of this too, you're coming at this from the position of, look, once these kids get their bachelor's degree, they need to get a job. This is not something that we can ignore in the academy. And there are a lot of folks who say, "Oh well, you know, the academy's job is to provide an education and you know what the job is, that's not our problem." And, and I think that's really, that's sort of taking our responsibility as mentors and as educators and throwing it out the window. I mean, one of our biggest jobs is to make sure that once these kids leave with their bachelors, that they're ready for prime time.

And it occurred to me that the research papers that I have my students do, and every sociology class I teach, they really are more like position papers or policy papers, because I ask them to pick out some social issue that's related to the topic of the class, and then write a paper on, "here are three things that cause this problem" or "this problem causes these other problems and here's how to fix it."

And it really is something where you could see a city councilman writing that, and presenting it to the board and saying, look, we've got to, you know, we've got to do something about this. Or a legislator bringing it to the floor for a reading to say, look, we've got to have some law here, to deal with problem A, which may bring down the crime rate.

And it didn't occur to me until now that I really am creating these assignments much in the way you're talking about. It's gotta be something they could show to an employer later. You know, here's the portfolio. Here's a piece that I wrote. You know, I want to be a social worker. Here's a piece that I wrote on how to reduce poverty in immigrant communities. And I was wondering, you know, is that the kind of thing you're talking about?

Professor Norman: Exactly. And can I ask you, have you thought of changing one of those assignments to make it a, "write a letter to the editor of the publication of your choice, whether it's a newspaper or a blog, you know, something else"? It sounds like you could do that. I've done that a few times because that could lead to a publication which then can show, wow, you're serious, you, you thought carefully about an issue.

So, you know, even if it doesn't get published, it could have value and somebody could say, "yeah, wow, you showed critical thinking," which every employer all, you know, I look a lot at an employment data and the employment history is what employers want.

And that's why the university exists. Critical thinking skills, effective written communication skills, almost every major, maybe dance doesn't, you know, but I think almost every major, you have to communicate effectively in writing. And if in dance, maybe if you're not writing, it should be, you know, verbally and non-verbally. And I still think that dance has an element of critical thinking, right? You're trying to connect with an audience, right? So you are demonstrating that in every aspect of the university that I can imagine. Or if not, and you know, we should challenge folks to say "why not?"

The other reason why it's so important is that I survey my students three times during a semester to learn a lot about them. And over 12 years, 80 to 90% of my students are already working 30 hours. Right? So we, we are not engaged in teaching students who are navel-gazing. You know, my hardest challenge is to get them to spend the two hours out of class in my, my class because some of my colleagues seem not to expect very much. They show up and do 10 minutes worth of work, and they can take six classes and hold down a full time job.

I don't know how that's possible. I was a very good student. If you looked at my Harvard transcript, every year that I took five classes in the semester, I went from getting all A's to getting one C+, which I didn't like, cause

an A student doesn't like C+s. But I take heart, I know I found that Google did some research showing the person with that extra C+ is actually a better manager and leader in Silicon Valley, at least in the Google context, than the straight A, because I took some chances, took some risks, right, and stretched myself. But, you know, I think from our students' perspective that when you're doing more than five and, and I didn't work full time, I would work 10 hours, um, sometimes as a bartender, you know, in the library. So I worked more than the average Harvard student, but I didn't work 40 hours. I had no family responsibilities.

So, uh, you know, that, that's what I would, you know, kind of ask back is, "are people finding ways to take work they're doing and share it with a wider community?" I don't think enough of us do that. That shouldn't just be for poli sci professors. There are all kinds of management issues, especially with our CSU system. You know, I feel I can turn anything into a management issue, so "let's go tell the Chancellor how we think," right? And I love having 30 of those letters go to the Chancellor's desk.

And on that issue, I've never had one hit the LA Times or anything, but, but, you know, one of these days that student's gonna have a really well-crafted statement dealing with something like why the Graduation Initiative, you know, setting this expectation that everybody graduates in four years, is really harmful to a lot of our students. It makes them feel like there's something wrong with them when our, I think our campus knows there is nothing wrong with somebody working 40 hours taking six years to learn at the right pace, because they know their employer wants them to learn something.

It's not about just getting a degree. It's about teachers like yourself, who care, yeah, and want that sociology major to go out and do something great right, and to advance the career to become the type of leader we want, that really has the skills, not the one that's faking it, but, but we live in this era of kind of fake news, I think fake credentials. So, um, our work is even more important than, than it was when I started.

Dinur: And it almost seems like part of the issue is reshifting: what should education be? Should it be just learning raw facts, or should it be actually taking information and working with it, putting it to use, you know? For you yourself, like with your students, with landing a job, with being able to interview? Or making a big difference in the community? Things like that. So it seems like the difference is: do we want the focus on the knowledge or on the skills themselves?

Professor Norman: Right.

Adam: And I think, too, that that may even be creating a false dichotomy where: why can't we have both? You know, I've had people tell me, I've had some folks like, you know, Chronicle of Higher Ed, right? And I've gotten into irritated conversations in the comments and they say, "Well, the university is an ivory tower and that's what it's supposed to be."

I'm all, "Why can't it also be job training?"

Dinur: Right.

Adam: "Well, if you want job training, go to community college."

Well, but what if you want to be an engineer? You know that's not something you can do with a two year degree. That's not something you can do with an AA or an ASMR. You gotta have at least a bachelor's degree.

"Well, they shouldn't look at it as job training." Well, why not? That's the goal, right?

I mean, when I ask students, why are you here on the first day of class, I ask them to interview their classmates. So I put them in little groups and I say, "all right, here's what I want you to find out." And, and I'm looking at this more as a, you know, social science interview, not a management interview, like a job interview, but I say "find out what their name is, what their favorite hobby is, why they're here. You know, why are they taking this class and what do they want to do after they finish school?"

And I don't say "what job do they want? Just what did they want to do?"

Well, 95% of them say, "I'm here because I have to get a job" or "I'm here because I need a better income and I can't get a better income unless I have a bachelor's degree." And so we need to face that reality.

Now granted, all three of us are teaching at the Cal State University system and this podcast is, you know, it's an international podcast. I've got people listening from Britain and I've got people listening from Brazil. But the thing is that we need to look at the purpose of higher education. And part of that purpose, I think, in this day and age, whether we like it or not, is making sure the student's ready for the job market. And too often we don't seem to prioritize that.

So Tom, you mentioned that - at one point when you and I were chatting, you said you wanted your students to use their phones and record videos of themselves to show mastery of the topic. Could you go into a little more detail? 'Cause I found that so interesting, but we didn't have a lot of time at that time.

Professor Norman: Sure. I mean, you know, everybody has this, this camera, right? This really amazing video camera. Uh, and for the international listeners, right? I want you to know that I bring this to Albania where I've taught, and I actually started some of these projects with phones in Albania and Cameroon or Ethiopia and Vietnam, right? This, this applies over Argentina. I'm working now more, more recently and, uh, students love recording themselves right now, right? We're in this era of YouTube and Tik Tok.

So one thing a manager will do is training, right? And if suddenly you're hiring a hundred people, say you're hiring a hundred people a to sell it, your store a hundred people to be tellers at your bank, it might not be efficient to coach a hundred people one at a time. You could make a training video, right? And students have a lot of creativity. So like in Albania, I was doing work where a bank was sponsoring it. So they wanted these people to have skills that veg would find valuable once they earn their bachelor's degree. And they created a guideline was five minutes - and I don't want to watch unlimited amount. I gave him a little Slack of the, went over to seven, no penalty - But you know, the goal is a five minute video on how to use an ATM, something a little bit newer in this country. Right? So how would, how would they teach, uh, employees, and how would employees be able to teach customers how to use this new machine to get money? Um, and it, and it was fantastic, right?

We could teach them on the effectiveness of training videos. I started out by showing them an old 1980s video from Wendy's on how to cook a hamburger, which is one of my favorite training videos ever, 'cause they use humor - a really cheesy rap song. But then they show, they press four quarters of their square patty and they, you know, show a one, two, three, they add on the video so you'll see it. They make fun of how much salt - "you do this shake of salt," and then they show the example where you put too much, right, big pile of salt on there. So it's funny, but you visually are seeing exactly what to do, or something you might think is mundane - grilling a hamburger. They cut through it to show that it has to be gray versus pink, because *e. coli*, right? It's important to cook the patty, you know, exactly this way. You keep people from getting sick, you make it the optimum quality and then people will come back to Wendy's.

And I challenge them: can you do that with a task like utilizing an automated teller machine? Or you know, take the task with entrepreneurs and they have a company, they, they think of, you know, whatever skill it is, maybe "how are we going to introduce a customer? What is going to be the sales script?" Teach them how to do that.

Students - the more memorable ones would be, uh, how to prepare a cup of espresso. Um, you know, how to serve someone in a cafe. A lot of countries that I go to, cafes are a big, big business, you know, a family business and, and that all could be done with the phone and they can practice, right? And if you think of the amount of time they put into it, nobody's giving me their first video. Right? So they're actually understanding what I wished I'd learned with the paper because many students give me are only draft of a paper. I have never seen somebody give me their first draft of a video. So they can then talk about why editing is important, why thinking of your customer's important, and when people, you know, there's an ownership when it's your face or your friend's, you know, face is on something, it doesn't seem to exist when it's just a bunch of words.

Adam: That's interesting.

Professor Norman: So, that's, you know, one way to use the phone.

Dinur: Now do you tend to have your students work together in groups on these projects? Do you tend to have them work separately, or is it kind of a mix of both, depending on the topic?

Professor Norman: For the video, because you need a camera person, it always has to be a team. Right? I've never had anybody do an effective training individually. But I, you know, as I think about it, they could with something like Zoom, right? They could record a video, they could narrate slides. So, so I've done that in a different context, but never where everybody was required.

I have something I kind of called Norman's Menu of Activity Points. So for people who like to express themselves visually, I've given that as an option, because I personally hate reading boring papers. I'd much rather have a gifted photographer give me a photo exploration of a strike. You know, that like that, that is fun. That was one of my favorite variations too. You could write about a a strike, but wow, if there's actually a strike happening here and you're a photographer and you go out and take, you know, five photos and caption them, that that's going to get an A for me. Right. And so some students are like, Oh, that's too easy! If you're a photographer, it's not that easy, right. How many photos was he looking at, to choose five?

Adam: I think it's interesting, because Dinur is a sports photographer in his spare time. So he's - that nodding that you're seeing here in the video is him going, "Yup. Yup. That's it. Absolutely true." And I'm sure, Dinur, that if you gave that assignment to your students, you would be critiquing them not just on what was in the photos, but the content and the framing. And you were saying, no, this is not working.

Dinur: Or, not even that - I would ask them to take me through the process. So, okay. What caught your eye when you took this picture? Was it the lighting? Was it - I do sports. So was it the action? Was it the crowd? What stood out to you? What, why did you choose this?

Adam: And now you've given me a, you know, some thought about an assignment that I gave my methods students, uh, four semesters ago, I want to say. Only one group went all the way to presenting their work, which was, you know, each step, they got more credit. So if they only went this far, then everybody got a C. And if they went this far, then they got a C+. And if they went this far, well, so this one group went all the way to putting their video on YouTube. And it turned out that their research showed that they had not paid attention to

something. And so the research results did not support their final, uh, their final contention - you know, what they wanted to support? They were, they had to say, "we had to reject our hypothesis because we didn't think about this. And next time we will."

That's still up on YouTube. I show it to my current methods students, when I teach a methods class, I'm all, "this is what you can achieve." And it was a three person team - and you know them, they have spoken to the Academic Senate several times, but they were quite sheepish at the end about, "well, we didn't take this into account like we should have. And now that means that this is not - we were not able to successfully support the hypothesis, but we've learned a lot for the next time we need to do something like this."

And they got an A, because it was a really good video, but it was the only one they gave. So now you're making me think, "maybe I should make this where it can either be a paper project or it can be a video project, so that the students who really may not be, ever, as talented at writing as I want them to be, could grab their phone and make an excellent video to talk about what they know."

So you've just given me some ideas. So, teachers who are listening, there's an idea for you, you know? Substitute a video for the paper, or substitute a photo montage for a paper, and see what you get.

Professor Norman: And I understand for those of you in a lot of European countries, where the Ministry of Education's more involved and you have to do the exam, right - you know, I always try to push the limits. So I know it's harder for some instructors to do this, but you should be leading the charge, right? And sharing and getting on this podcast, you know, publishing - and that's part of my mission too, is to, you know, encourage other countries to just think differently.

I've had one of my projects banned by Albania. So I, I feel I've been doing a good job, right? If you're pushing people so far they're like, "Uh, we don't know if we really want our students to know this much about sexual harassment." Okay. And the women came up to me saying, "yes, this is an issue here too." So they liked it. But, you know, that's part of the importance, I think, and the wonder of the internet is that all of these ideas get to go everywhere. And sometimes, we're gonna run up against some of these industry censors.

But to Adam's point, right? Sometimes we censor ourselves. In the U.S., I find it's just a sense of convention and in the US, use your freedom to make this job a job that you love to go into every day. I love to have my students delight me. You know, it's not every student's gonna delight you, but if you give them a chance, in a class of 40, I always find there's two or three I'm just like, "Wow." You know? "Thank you for asking me if you could take pictures. Right. Cause now everybody, I give that as an example. Please. If you're gifted taking pictures, take pictures and share them."

And the stuff the students like the best are seeing good videos and pictures, right? It just makes the classroom! And you end up with this portfolio stuff then to teach in future classes, if you get permission, and I'm, 95% of the time I get permission from the students to show their photos, show their work, you know, then they're actually becoming part of something better, and that helps them get a job, right? They can actually say, "In Dr. Norman's class, he liked my video so much, which I'm showing you right, that he's using that in future classes." That gives you a leg up on the job market.

Adam: Mm-hmm. And that's a good point too. I know that there've been several times I've said to a student, "the way you did your annotated bibliography should be an example. And I would really love to show this to my students as an example. If I take your name off of it, is it okay with you if I show it to them?"

And they're all, "Oh, totally, totally. You know, let me see. Let me see it."

What I like about what you, what you've been saying is that you've constantly been saying, look, get involved with your community. Don't just make this something that happens in the sterile box of the classroom. And even if it's an adaptive learning classroom, it's still, you know, you want to bring it out to the community. So what would you say to, uh, to both teachers and students about how to take what you're doing in the classroom and bring it out into the real world, whether it's to find a job or just to make an impact? What, what would you say to them?

Professor Norman: You know, to, to ask yourself, "What am I doing that's valuable to people I know?" And, and people need to go out and talk to people in their community. Right? One of the challenges in LA is some people live really far away and, you know, don't get to know the community around where our students live, but, you know, they still know their communities and more and more of our students are commuting. So, um, for those familiar with Putnam's "Bowling Alone," something I've lamented, over my adult years is we aren't bowling together in groups, right? We're not doing community activities. People don't want to door walk as much in campaigns. Uh, but maybe we should challenge ourselves to think of our existing connections and what is it that I'm doing that would be of use to my friend who's a firefighter, my friend who's a lawyer? You know, hopefully we have a diversity of friends and even just, you know, ask the questions.

I find, um, at most parties, I'm considered an interesting person because people like to talk about college, if you do it in the right way. And I ask people to be class speakers, so something we haven't talked about, but I've had a huge variety of class speakers, and most people are, "Oh, nobody's ever asked me. Nobody ever thought that I could contribute something." Everyone I meet has something they can contribute.

I don't give everybody the full 75 minutes, but you know, sometimes it's just an honor - I have a student, you know, emailing me right now that I said, "Wow, I'm really proud you got this promotion for LA Count. Would you like to come talk to my students about your process?"

And he's like, "Oh, I never thought that would happen. I was that student that was late. I was working at FedEx and I thought you didn't like me." It's like, no, I respect that. That's, you know, I, I have a policy where I don't take attendance. You come when you can and understand that all of you can be on time. And he's had some down times. And he said, that letter that I, that email I sent him when I saw this made his day. He'd gone through a really tough year of being unemployed. He, you know, his value, he was kind of questioning it. And for somebody to say, "No, you've got this new job, this is a great job. In fact, you know, some of my students want to be what you are someday." You know, he said it was very inspirational. He's even given a gift to the university.

You know, saying, you know, this helps us feel connected. So, um, you know, if you don't have any friends, you have students. Try to turn some of your students into - and this is where I'm careful. I don't let them - the first year, I made the mistake of having them follow me on Facebook. I now have a barrier; I have them follow me on LinkedIn.

Try to connect with them and build relationships, professional relationships, and then with your existing folks, you know, try to open up your classroom, whatever you're teaching there. There might be some aspect - if you find out people's lived history, if you're a history professor. "Wow. Um, you know, your family lived in Tulsa during the Tulsa massacre," you know, like, "Oh, what is that like? Or do you have photos?" Right. Sometimes people are shy, but "Oh, I really wish somebody would appreciate, you know, this piece of family history I have."

And that's what the university I don't think is doing as well as it could. And even where I think, you know, one of my value-adds is as being this glue that I, I get involved in way too many things. I suppose, a lot of different things, but it does allow me to be this connector to - you know, I personally feel I've helped, right? Thousands of people come to Dominguez Hills and come and change their impression. Like, "wow, this is a pretty campus". Right. You know, people when I joined said, "Oh, I'm at Dominguez Hills," like they were sad, and I bring people here and I've seen nothing but amazement. Like, "wow, I didn't know this existed. Wow. You know, look at this classroom. Wow, your students are fantastic. Like they have all this work experience. They're really interesting to talk to because you know, they don't just shop at the mall, you know, like they, they work at the mall and they have hired and fired people."

So, you know, I just think we need to talk about our profession. We need to be proud about our profession. and we need to realize that in general, you know, most of our friends who have gone to college like to feel their professors, they might suspect you're one of those professors they would have liked if they were your students.

Adam: I like what you said too, about being a connector. I might actually have you come and talk to one of my intro classes, because we were just doing network theory and I said "the star network, there's a guy in the middle and everybody has to go through him. So he has an enormous amount of power." And I've had students say, "I don't really understand this." I think I could just have you come in and talk about being a connector, and they'd all get it.

So, and what you said about, you know, have speakers come in - Dinur, you spoke, wasn't it to my urban sociology class back when we were both still at UC Riverside?

Dinur: Yep.

Adam: And I had Dinur come in and talk about some of his research on

Dinur: I think on sports, wasn't it?

Adam: Yeah, it was on sports. It was on student athletes and on how athletics kind of shapes the city. If you have, you know, say a big stadium in the city, it's going to be, that's where that stadium is.

Dinur: And the city's identity as well.

Adam: Identity, income. Remember Scott Brooks, he was with us at UC Riverside. He's now at, I think he's now at Penn.

Dinur: I thought he was at Arizona State

Adam: Oh, was he at Arizona? But he did his dissertation research, with boys in basketball leagues in Philadelphia. And Philadelphia is a huge, huge basketball town. And so when I talk about his research to my students, I'll say, so he did this very deep qualitative research with these boys from very poor neighborhoods, very disadvantaged neighborhoods. And you know, on them moving from the, basically the little league -

Dinur: Well, no, from informal street ball to organized teams, to college or to professional.

Adam: Right. And then the thing is that I asked my students, "so could he do the same research in LA?" And they all look at me and they say, uh, and I say, "is LA a big basketball culture the way that Philly is?" Oh, no, no, it's not.

And I wish I could have had him come and talk to one of my classes because they were very insistent that of course we're a big basketball culture here, and I'm all, "Well, if we were, he would have done his research here."

But I think having people come in and talk about their areas of expertise is maybe something we don't do enough of in the academy because we get so married to "this is the curriculum and I must teach every bit of it." And the fact is that we have to be more flexible, I think with what we bring into the classroom.

Dinur: Right.

Adam: And I think that's an important lesson that you've just taught both of us and that I hope that other instructors and professors will take away from hearing you say it, that you gotta be a little more flexible, connected more to the real world.

So, what didn't we ask you that you would've liked us to ask you?

Professor Norman: Um, this was wonderful. I mean, we hit some of my main topics. I do advocate more people thinking and trusting their students to flip the classroom. If you are familiar with Bloom's taxonomy, why do we take the two lowest levels of learning kind of outcomes and we do them in class, when students, you can just as effectively read a book or watch a recorded lecture and learn to understand material? And why don't we instead take those 75 precious minutes that I have and have them do the harder stuff, the analyze, the evaluate, the create, instead?

Most people give that as homework, and they get stuck and they don't have it., and they need the expert then. And I don't want to go to everybody's house, right? Or I don't want to Zoom them at 11 at night when they're working on it. So can I take, you know, 60 minutes of my class time, supplemented with little micro-lectures of five to 15 minutes, you know, with the content that I can see they're not getting from my quizzes? I give weekly quizzes. Okay, let's let me try to touch up and improve upon, or answer that question about content they didn't understand, and then let's go about applying and evaluating it.

And that's how I come up with all these different activities. 'Cause now I have 60 minutes, you know, to 120 minutes every week. We've got to do something, right? We want to make it fun. I love this.

Back to - other people are like, "well, nobody ever shows up." I have a 125-person classroom, and you know, I have like 95 there! And I don't take attendance because we try to make it fun. They're like, "Oh, he's bringing staplers today. What are we gonna do with staplers?" We're gonna make widgets, and we're going to figure out production wise, you know, capital mobility versus labor mobility.

You're going to learn what it's like some of you to get unemployed. And some of you who get to be CEOs - because there'll be 14 CEOs, some of you are going to learn what it's like to go bankrupt. So I'm going to auction off your stuff, right? And then, you know, but it's fun that everybody loves that thing.

Another day I bring M&Ms, and we're going to learn supply and demand, because I'm going to - three packets of M&Ms, from three different people, based on who gives me the best price. And then I'm going to sell a

packet of M&Ms to up to three people who will pay me the most money with real cash. They've got to pay me and I pay them. Um, you know, I endow everybody with one free packet of M&Ms, but then they, you know, they walk out - 80% don't really remember supply and demand, which you're supposed to.

And the research shows by being very active and deriving the supply curve in real time, and putting the dots on there to see where that line came from, and realizing that market clearing price, which has risen from 25 cents to 30 cents - oh, this is like a Halloween size packet of M&Ms you'd get. They then kind of get a concept that if they were learning this with multiple choice exams, you know, just brute force? They haven't really retained it.

And the key thing about learning is that retrieval, long-term memory works best when you have to retrieve it in unique ways, right? You have that deep learning, if you understand the theory of economics that you don't get when, you know, when I first started, brute force, trying to think, "Oh, if this goes up, that goes down."

Now I can geometrically think about this. So if I pose a question to the viewers, what would happen if we deported every illegal Mexican tomorrow - which theoretically could now happen, right? 12 years ago I thought this was total fantasy. This actually could be reality if that happened - what would happen to the price of a car wash in Los Angeles?

And if you, if you know intuitively, like, "Oh, supply of labor is going to shift this direction and where it's going to go with the demand for labor, that means the price is going to go up dramatically, right?" Because if you look at LA car washes - and unfortunately there are a lot of illegal laborers working in that particular profession, and documented in the LA Times - so if they suddenly aren't there, how, you know what price we have to pay somebody else to wash your car? Probably a lot more than they were.

And that's the, you know, kind of the plea I have, I guess, for listeners is: I think anything you do, you could come up with a story you read in the LA Times and turn that into a learning moment that engages students, when they can walk out thinking, "Wow, this might be the best lecture I've ever had." Right? That's the challenge we should have. And then I have to stop, to say, cause I thought that was pretty good eight years ago, but then the stapler one, everybody loves that better because it's a little bit easier and it's making things, and not sitting around, you know, doing auctions. So that, that's kind of a last little set of stories I thought I might share with you.

But I really appreciate the fact that you have a podcast. I congratulate you for being to Episode 40 - you know, that's really exciting.

Adam: I'm still kind of blown away that we're at Episode 40!

Professor Norman: But I wanted to thank, you know - I haven't met you before, so it's really wonderful to meet Dinur; and Adam, you know, we've known each other for a while, so I've always appreciated her conversations and, and appreciate you recording this one.

Dinur: Likewise!

Adam: Thank you.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 40. 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 41, when we'll talk about how to write effective true/false, multiple-choice, and matching questions.

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

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Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!