



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

Episode 47 - How to Talk to Your Professors About Grades

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 47 - how to talk to your professors about grades.

Many students feel the need to talk to professors about their grades, but there are right ways and wrong ways to do this and in this episode we'll talk about this issue and how students and teachers can handle it effectively.

Dinur: Talking to professors about your grade can help you get some perspective on them. However, like Adam just said, there are good ways and bad ways to go about this. The good ways will help you get the professor on your side. The bad ways we'll do pretty much the opposite.

Adam: Dinur and I are going to talk about our own experiences with students who have come to us using... ineffective, let's say, ways to talk about their grades, and then we'll talk about how to course-correct on those.

Dinur: So the first one is grade-grubbing. You're passing the class, you're good, but you're not getting that B+ you feel like you deserve, or that A. Instead, you've got a flat B, or even a B-minus.

I've had students ask me, "I've got an 85%; can I get an A if I do the extra credit, will that push me there? I've worked really, really, really hard in your class."

You know, one, like, I'm glad you did. I hope that you would give me a good effort. That's what I ask. But if you're at an 85%, there's no way I'm bumping you up 5% or 10%, like, just off the bat. So probably not.

I had a student a couple of years ago and they wrote a really, really excellent term paper for me. Like, they'd come to my office hours multiple times, I think four or five times. Each time they had done revisions on their draft and I gave them an A. Like they answered the paper so well that I was impressed. I gave them an A that that earned, and the response was, "Well, why don't I have an A+ on this?"

And that's a really good way to piss me off.

One of the things for me is, I don't give many A+s. And when I do, I compare my A papers and I pick the best two, three, five at most out of them, and I add a few extra points. So for me, an A tells me this student has mastered this idea, they've demonstrated everything I've asked for, and they've written an especially strong paper. So now they're asking for a few extra points?

And it's not like I can give an A+ as an overall grade anyway. So even that A+, even those, say, three or four extra percent, weren't going to matter of a whole hell of a lot, because that student was already acing the class. So it wasn't taking them from a C, up to, say, a B - and those extra points would push them into a B+. The student was getting I think an A already and they wanted an A+, which I'm not able to assign as a grade.

Adam: And I had a student who was getting 19 out of 20 on journals. And they had five questions; each question could be rated up to four points, where a four-point answer was "excellent" and a three-point answer was "met the expectations" and then the two and one were, you know, "you need to fix this" or "this really - you turned in garbage."

And so they were getting, you know, four points, four points, four points, four points on four of the five questions. But one of the questions was just, "what was your muddiest point?" Meaning, what was something you were confused about?

Now if you weren't confused about anything, then the "meets expectations" answer was "I had no muddy points." Now if a student said, "I had a muddy point and this was really what I was having trouble with and this and this and they went into detail about it," that would be an "excellent" answer. That would be a four-point answer. But most of the time students are like, well, "I had no muddy points."

Whether you had a three-point or four-point response on that question did not make a difference to the overall grade for this student. They had an "excellent" on the whole thing either way, but they wanted a hundred percent perfect. And they demanded to know why they were not getting perfect scores.

And I said, "Because you don't need it."

They're all, "Yes I do. 'Cause if I haven't gotten a perfect score then I'm a failure."

I'm all, "So, 19 out of 20 is a failure?"

"Yes. 'Cause it's not 20 out of 20!"

And that is a fixed mindset problem. And we're going to talk about this a little bit later, when we talk about how to talk to your teacher about your grades effectively, 'cause that was not effective. Telling me, "I need to be perfect or I'm not good enough" - while I sympathize, I get it. I've been there. I'm a member of the Recovering Perfectionists Club - it doesn't change the fact that what you answered was at "met expectations." Move on with your life.

Now Dinur labeled that "grade-grubbing," and that's a pretty good label, although grade-grubbing does have a broader implication - just the general begging for your grade to be changed or demanding that your grade be changed is also considered grade-grubbing. But teachers, we've actually sort of developed a typology of different bad approaches that students use, and grade-grubbing is only the first.

So, the second one is one we've labeled "appeal to curves." And this is a student who thinks that curving the grade will somehow give them a better score or a passing score. Now this shows a fundamental misunderstanding of how curves work. A curve does not add points to the grade. It basically sets the grade related to how everyone else in the class did. So your score may not actually go up with a curve, students. It may go down.

And normally, most professors don't curve grades when the overall class is doing okay. It's only when the entire class bombs the exam that we'll consider curving, because if everyone failed the exam, that indicates either a problem with the way we taught the material, or a problem with the exam itself. And this is - when I was in grad school, we did actually have this happen once in a stats class that I took. Nobody in the class got better than a 60% on the stats exam and our professor sat there shaking his head - there were like 15 of us in this second year seminar - shaking his head and going, "I have no idea why you don't understand this, but if none of you understand this, it's not you, it's me." So he curved our scores on that one test, but he still set the scores so that we weren't getting great grades, we were getting okay grades.

And then he went over every single concept and every single formula that we had not understood and he made sure that we understood it before we took a retake of that exam, which he felt was necessary, because he felt he had not done his due diligence. So we'll put a link in the show notes from Hamilton University that talks about how curves actually work. But be aware, students, asking for curves does not mean "add 12 points to my score." That's not how that works.

Dinur: Right. And one of the things I've told students when they ask if I curve grades, I tell them "no, and you really don't want me to because then that means most of you are getting Cs and I don't think most of you are going to be very happy with that."

Will I adjust scores? Sure. Like I might throw out a bad question on a test, or two bad questions, if I see everyone struggling with them. That means maybe I didn't cover the material well or I wrote a really bad question. And so in that sense, I'll adjust the scores - but I do not curve them.

So the third part in our typology is what we call "appealing to responsibilities outside of school." And these are things like "I had something come up with work three months ago but I didn't tell you until now and now I need a grade," or, "I had a family emergency two months ago. I thought you knew about it even though I didn't email you or tell you. And now I need a grade."

I've mentioned in previous episodes, I had a student who missed turning in an assignment because something had come up with work, and they only told me several weeks - like, almost a month after the fact. And their words were, "But I thought you knew."

My response was, "Did you email me?"

"No..."

How am I going to know that something came up with work? I'm not a mind reader, you know. As far as I know, Adam didn't get a PhD in mind reading either, so generally -

Adam: So I tried, but they didn't offer it. So, you know, I got sociology, which was the next best thing.

Dinur: So, I mean, if you don't let us know and have something that we can look at - I know I've mentioned in previous episodes the importance of emailing your professor? If you just come to us at the end of the term and say "something came up with work or with my family," it doesn't come off as you being responsible. It comes off as you trying to throw an excuse as to why you don't have a grade. And that's not fair to you.

But it's also not fair to us. You know, if you let us know when something's happening, "Hey, I just got promoted at work. They just changed my work hours," "My mom has surgery," "I need to fly out of the state for a funeral" - if you let us know roughly in real time, then we can work with you. Because that shows us, okay, they're trying to deal with something that's challenging now. Whereas if you come to us three, four, five weeks after the fact, if not later, it's going to come off as you looking for an excuse to get rid of some zeros in the grade book.

Adam: And I know I've mentioned the student who - their mom lost their job, and suddenly the student became the head provider for the family, but again, they didn't tell me, right? These are all things where, yes, we understand that you have responsibilities outside of school. We understand that. We did too, but if you don't tell us there's no way that we can know. And if you expect us to know, that's really unrealistic at best and unfair at worse.

Now this also leads into "appeals to professor sympathy." This is the fourth thing in our typology. This is the student who says, "If I don't pass this class, I lose my scholarship or my financial aid or my internship or my work-study" - or whatever it is. Well, the first thing we think is "This is something you needed to think about a lot earlier than finals week." I see this a lot, but the problem is, a student who does this is hoping for a last-minute fix for their own irresponsibility most of the time.

Now, if it's about outside-of-school problems, which we just talked about, come in earlier than the last week of school - unless the outside-of-school problem happened just that week. But if your only reason for asking us to help you pass the class is because you'll lose your scholarship or your internship or your financial aid, and you don't have a good explanation for why you didn't do the work, or why you didn't do it well enough, this not only does not work as a reason, but it really annoys your professors that you expect us to just give in because we're feeling sympathetic.

And it's also a great way to kill our sympathy, by the way, when we hear, "Well, I know I didn't do much work but now I really need this class or I'm going to fail," that is not a one-class problem. If you are missing our class, I'd be willing to bet that there are other classes that you are also struggling with, and you've told the same story to every one of your professors - and all you've done is made us annoyed with you. Don't do that.

Dinur: Right? Benefit of the doubt is something that's earned. And the way you earn that benefit of the doubt is by being consistently engaged with the class throughout the semester. Are you doing the assignments on time, and at least at a C level? Because that at least shows us, "Hey, this person is trying to deal with the skills, trying to deal with the topic we're teaching, and they're doing an okay job with it." Are you talking in class? Are you participating? All these little things that may be hidden from our minds - at the end of the term, we look at that. We remember who spoke more.

If nothing else, we have a record - or I keep a running tally of how many times my students participate, so I can say, "Yeah, this person's been pretty consistently engaged. I can give them the benefit of the doubt," because they've earned that, but if I have a student who doesn't talk and they're missing, you know, half or more of their assignments, and then they want my sympathy, well, it's tough because what have you done to give me? I want that show of good faith, you know, so that I can extend that courtesy to you.

So the next part in the typology is “the Hail Mary pass.” So a Hail Mary pass, in football, is a last-ditch effort for the offense to score a touchdown. It's usually a long pass all the way down the field. It's kind of a free-for-all. Everyone both on the offense and the defense is trying to get that ball, and it's done because, hey, one team is down. They need that score to try and win, or to try and tie the game as time expires. And sometimes it works, but more often than not it doesn't.

And this is when a student comes up with something totally out of left field. Like, “Can I get extra credit for sitting in the front of the class that one time?” or “Can my final exam score -” the only assignment they've completed - “be my overall class grade?”

Don't do this.

I've had students ask for additional extra credit opportunities that were not on the syllabus. And I tell them, like, if it wasn't on the syllabus - one, that's not a bad idea. I might put that on for a future class. But that's not something that your classmates are able to do. So it's pretty unfair to them to do that. Okay.

I've had students who've tried the Hail Mary of a grade appeal. And one of the things I tell my students is, when you appeal a grade, I want you to put in writing where you think the mistake was made, either by myself or by my teaching assistant. Because if you want me to just regrade your paper, there are three ways it could go, and two of them are not the way you want it to go, right? You want your grade to go up, but I am just as comfortable keeping your grades the same if I think the overall grade reflects the work pretty accurately. Or, if I think the original grade was a little too generous, and now I keep finding more and more mistakes - because you wanted me to do a complete regrade on your assignment - your grade might go down.

So when you want to appeal a grade, and I hope that it's rare, right? I hope that most of the time, if not all of the time, you go, “Okay, I understand why I got the grade I got,” but put the issue in writing, let us know. Did we say you missed something in your thesis statement? Maybe, you know, maybe we did. But put it in writing so that I can say, “Okay, oh yeah, this person did put this in there. I don't know why I missed it the first time. I'll give some points back.”

But if you're just throwing out an appeal, like you expect that grade to magically go up a full letter and you don't give a reason, I'm not going to be overly sympathetic.

Adam: So essentially it's a snowball's chance in hell, right? We're, we're trying really hard, but we're pretty sure this isn't going to work. Students, if you're going to do this kind of appeal, just don't, 'cause it's probably not going to work. The chance of it working is slim to none. Slim has left town, and None is getting their train tickets now.

So, the last part of this typology that we've created - and teachers, if you can think of other things that ought to be in this typology, by all means, email us. You can email me at adam@undergradeasier.com and send in your appeals that you have received - but the last one is “appeals to novelty,” which is a student who does not understand, or says they do not understand, how the class works. And so they feel they should pass anyway, because they were treating it like all their other classes.

So, this is a student who asks for extra credit, even though the syllabus says there's no extra credit in this class; or, asking for partial credit, even though there's no partial credit in this class and it says so in the syllabus; or otherwise, just ignoring how the class runs.

I had a student try to grieve an F, because there was no extra credit allowed in the course. And it was a grievance that they filed with the department, said “He doesn't allow extra credit and that's not fair, so I shouldn't have an F!” He was, you know, not laughed out of the room, but I don't think anybody took it seriously.

These students have just not earned the benefit of the doubt. Again, what Dinur was talking about, if you have not done some of the work and shown us that you're trying to do the work, then you shouldn't get any benefit of the doubt. That student who tried to grieve that F had failed literally every quiz in the class, and they had done no other work. And their argument was, they said “The grading system is too confusing to understand, and there should be extra credit.”

Saying “I don't understand the syllabus” - that works in week two. It does not work during finals week.

Dinur: And I've had students - so, I offer an extra credit option for my students, and it's worth roughly, like, half a percent in their overall grade. So, if they're borderline between two grades and they do a good job on the extra credit, I'm more than happy to bump them up to the next grade step.

But I've had students ask if they can do two or three of the extra credit options, to get double or triple the credit. And I go, “No, like, I'll let you do one, but I don't want to grade like up to three extra credit assignments times, say, 300 students. That's 900 extra things for me to grade. Like, there is no way I'm ever going to get through that much grading, and have all of the final grades done by the time they're due.”

So, I allow them to do the one option. It works effectively as a grade bump, but trying to ask for two or three assignments - for a full one to 2% and to me that comes off as, like, you're shooting for the moon. I appreciate the effort, I appreciate it, the dedication. But at the same time I would also ask, “Was there anything you could have done earlier?” And I'm not talking about a mistake on a test. I'm talking about, was there anything you could have done better on assignments?

And I will also say, I've mentioned in previous podcasts, I look for upward trends in my students' grades. So there are times where, if I see they bombed test one, but they got a C on test two, and an A on test three, and they've done that extra credit - I'm sometimes a little bit more lenient with how much I bump that grade up, because they've shown improvement, and I'm looking for that. But if it's pretty consistent low scores, and they're asking to do two or three assignments, it's not going to happen.

So, how do you talk to your professors about your grades? We just gave you examples of what not to do. So, when you talk to your professor about a C or a D you got on a test, here's how you should approach the conversation. “Professor Martinez, I had trouble with this formula or with this concept and I'm not sure I understand it. Could you help me understand it, so I can do better on the next exam?”

Adam: And any time you approach a professor to discuss your grade, your focus should be on three things - and none of them should be the grade. So first, where did you have problems understanding the material? Second, can the professor help you understand where you went wrong? And third, how can you improve?

Now notice: this looks really similar to the “Observe, Learn, Improve” approach that we outlined back in Episode 5. It's just doing the OLI Method with an outside observer, your professor, who may be able to point out things that you missed or overlooked. It always helps to have a second set of eyes when you're saying, “I don't understand why I don't understand. Can you tell me what I'm supposed to understand here, so that I can figure out how to approach it in a way that makes sense to me?”

Dinur: Your professors assign grades, but professors, especially those like Adam and myself, we focus on learning. We don't focus on memorization. We certainly don't focus on points. So if you're focusing on points or grades, we understand it. You're right, that grade is your goal - but if you bring that to us, then it tells us that you're wasting your time, our time, and your money.

Now, there are exceptions to this. If there was a mistake made - something like, "You know, Dr. Blum, your slides say that this is true, but on the test it was marked as false."

Okay. Maybe I wrote a bad question or something. Got miskeyed. Let me go check.

Or, you know, "You said I didn't write a definition for this, but I wrote it here."

Okay. Maybe I just missed it - I was going through so many papers. I didn't see it. It didn't click.

And when those mistakes are pointed out, I adjust scores. I add points really quickly. Sometimes I will say, "Hey, I wrote a really bad question, so I'm going to give everyone credit for this because, you know what? That's my mistake. That's something I need to learn from and improve on, and I don't want that to hurt students."

Now let's say you come to your professor and they say, "Well, your grade is going to stay the same." They couldn't find the mistake that you thought was made. Focus on how you can improve for the next test or the next assignment. Was there a concept that just didn't stick? Were you able to study in different ways? Right, Adam and I talked about using study groups and using flash cards, playing games in order to engage the material, you know. Are you doing that? What can you change, and how can you improve, so that your grade improves?

Adam: And I've got to say about this, too, I don't mind when students come to me and say, "Hey, your slides said that X is true, but on the test it was marked as false." I have that problem. All right? I had this happen about three weeks before the end of the semester - 'cause we're now in finals week, when we're recording this, at least for me - and I had a student with their hand up after I gave them the beginning-of-class quiz, and they said, "Hey, wait a minute, on question three you said that C was the answer, but everybody marked E."

And I said "Yes, that's called 'a mistake in the key.' That's my fault. I recognize that. The correct answer *is* E; my bad. And everybody gets credit for that."

Now, this was not even a big problem because it was just a quiz to see if they knew the material. It wasn't a quiz that got entered into their grade. It was just "they were there," and so they get credit for the in-class activity. But I still owned my mistakes.

Teachers, don't argue with students if they come to you and say, "Look, on the exam you said this is false. But in the lecture you said, it's true. We need some help here" - I remember, one time I had a cultural geography professor, back in the day when I was in undergrad, and I went to him and I said, "Look, I think a number of the questions that you've got here are way too open to interpretation. And I would like to explain my answers, to see if you can see your way clear to maybe a couple extra points."

And it turned out that there were six different questions, on a 100 question test that he was like, "Oh gosh, I hadn't realized that could be interpreted that way. But I totally see." So he went into the key, and he changed all

six of those to “everybody gets this,” you know, and some, some of the students, their grade went up by a half a point or half, you know, half a grade level, because I had pointed out “These are, there's a lot of bad questions.”

Most of us don't mind being told that we would rather know so that we can fix the problem. And if you don't tell us, we don't know, and you resent it. So please in that case, absolutely come to us and say, “Dr. Sanford, Dr. Blum, Dr. Martinez, this question is a bad question, and here's how I know.” We'll fix it.

Dinur: Now, you want to avoid certain ways of talking to the professor about your grade. So Adam and I ran through a few, but telling us “I worked really hard, so I should get more points than I got, because I don't get Cs or I don't get Bs.” That's not gonna work for us.

“Will I still be able to get an A in this course?” Maybe. I don't know what your situation is, and I don't want to tinker in the grade book because I don't want to tinker with a student's grade.

“Can I have extra credit to make up what I didn't get on this test?” And if there's extra credit listed in the class, you can do that. But we're not going to change the rules in the middle of the semester. We're not going to change them in the middle of the game.

And professors have a word for what's going on when you use these methods. That's called grade-grubbing or grade begging. And when you're already passing the class and you grade beg, or you grade-grub, professors find it extraordinarily childish and distasteful. It pisses us off. If you want to get on your professor's bad side, that's a really good way to do it. So, you might not want to.

We respect that students need good grades, right? They want to go to law school or medical school, other professional schools. They want to maintain their eligibility.

We also know that “good” is subjective, and it's going to be different from student to student. All right? Some students are happy with some level of a B; some are happy just passing the class; for some, anything short of an A is viewed as an F. I've had students, you know, in that camp.

Well, when you focus on the grade when you're talking with us, rather than the actual material or the skills - well, that suggests to us that what we're trying to teach doesn't matter to you, as long as you just get the grade you need. And that comes off as being disrespectful, because it takes time, it takes energy to create a good college class, right? To try and put complex ideas or complex skills or research ideas and have you work with them.

So when you only focus on the points with us, that tells us that, well, our effort and our energy was wasted, because you're just in it for the grade.

And for me at least, it comes off as assuming that your professors are acting in bad faith, that we're trying to screw you over - we're adversaries, for whatever reason. Well, we're not. Well, we certainly should not be adversaries. You know, I think both the way Adam and I view our job is we're here to teach and to mentor. We really like seeing our students succeed. We want to put you in the best position we can to help you succeed. And we're really proud of our students for everything that they accomplish.

Adam: Mm-hmm. And the thing about the grades, we know that for some of you, that fixed-mindset thing about “If it's not an A, then it's an F,” please go look at episode 21 which we did, oh, probably six months ago,

where we talked about what grades mean in college, because what they meant in high school and what they mean in college are very, very, very different.

And the thing about the adversaries, I tell my students, "You do not have to have a cage match with me for your grade. You just have to do the work."

I had one student put their hand up and say "A cage match would be easier."

And I said, "I know. That's why you can't fight me for a cage match for your grade."

Because, the thing is, we're not your adversaries - we're your mentors, but we're going to call you on it when we think you're trying to get around the rules, or when we think you're trying to get around the standards. That's not going to happen. We're not going to let you do that.

Now, keep track of your own grade, because you can't come to the professor in the last week of the course and say, "How am I doing?" If you care, you're going to keep track of it yourself. That's part of your job as a college student.

Almost every syllabus you get will talk about "This is how the grade is broken down. This is how many points or what percentage of your total grade each assignment, paper, quiz, exam, project, whatever, accounts for." So, at any time, you should be able to take your scores, compare them to the syllabus grade-level breakdown, and pretty much know what your grade is. And if you can't do that, then you can go talk to the professor. But if that information's available - and it should be - you should be able to do those calculations yourself.

Dinur: Now, I tend to enter my grades on Canvas, and I try to return my assignments to my students within three class meetings, so, within a week and a half at the latest, so that students are not in the dark about their grades. They can look on the system in real time.

Now the waiting may change the overall percentage. For example, I might have all three of my tests combined be worth 50% of the overall grade. And if they've only taken one test, then obviously that test is going to be overrepresented. But the waiting might change the overall percent. But students know what assignments are worth more than others, and they can, using that, make a ballpark estimate of what their grade is prior to the system telling them.

Now there are issues sometimes where a grade shows up on my end, and it doesn't show up on the student's end for some reason. I'm going to assume that that's just because it's Canvas (sorry, Canvas lovers, but it's that.) So it's one thing where I get frustration because of that, and I understand it, and I can at least say or show the student, "Hey, this is what your grade is showing on my end." But if you can see your grades, then you know what you're doing well. And if you're in class regularly and you pick up your assignments, you'll see it handwritten what you're getting on the papers so that you can judge that against what we have in the system.

Adam: Now, don't try to get an email about your grade. If you're in the United States, your professor is probably not going to email you about your grade, or respond to emails about your grade. And the reason for that is there's a federal law called FERPA that forbids it, except under certain very specific circumstances. Come to office hours or make an appointment to meet, and show your professor that you're interested in learning what they're teaching you and ask for help. At that point, you can safely ask about your grade.

Dinur: Remember that your grade is earned. Your professor doesn't "give" you a grade. They assign the grade based on the quality of the work you've done, as measured against a standard that everyone has to meet, all right? Are you exceeding everyone? Then yeah, you're probably going to get an A. Are you doing - you know, pretty damn good work, but it's not just mind blowing? Then you're probably going to get a B. Are you showing that you at least understand the material, but, you know, it's not wowing us? It's going to be a C.

Your grade is a function of the quality of the work you give your professors. It is no more than that and it is no less than that. We don't think of you as our "A student" or "B student" or "C student." You are "our student," and we are judging that assignment or that test against a certain standard and we're seeing who's meeting it - and hopefully everyone's meeting it, at at least a C level.

Adam: And the thing about that too, that "A student, B student" thing, that's a fixed-mindset thing. It's also creating an identity for yourself out of something that really should not be an identity. Too many of us - and this is not just students - too many of us, we create an identity for ourselves based on our accomplishments. When you do that, you're putting yourself on a pedestal that you built out of "things I've done" and all it takes is one failure for that pedestal to come apart and for us to fall.

And a better way to look at it is "how much did I improve when I did that? How much better am I now than the last time I did that? And if I'm worse, why? Do I understand why I'm worse? Do I understand what I need to do?"

But tying your identity to a letter grade is a really great way to set yourself up for, first, a lot of self-esteem problems and second, failure affecting you a lot worse than it should.

And these are the students who say, "I am an A student, I don't get Cs." And then, they get a C. Their whole identity goes to hell, because suddenly everything they based their "who I am" on has gone to sand under their feet - maybe quicksand.

It's not a good idea to base your identity on a grade, because if you do that, any mistake makes you feel like a failure - and mistakes? You can't get away from them. They're a necessary part of learning. And so when we "give" the grade that you get, it's based on what you've done and what you haven't done, not on who you are. I don't think less of you if you get Cs this term, when you got A's two terms ago. And I don't think more of you when you got A's this term, when you got a C last term. I look at you as my student who is putting in the work. That's the important part.

Dinur: Now, recognize that we are not going to bend the rules for you alone. If you're asking us to give you extra credit, then that means we have to give it to everyone in your class, and most of the time that's not going to happen, because if we have hundreds of students, we don't want to grade up to hundreds of extra assignments. It's why I tell my students they can do one extra credit option, not two or three, because three times 300 is 900 things to grade. I don't have the time or the energy or the desire to do all that much grading, especially if it's something that's right around the time that overall grades are due.

Adam: And I can hear - and I can hear some students thinking, "Well, then you're just mean and you don't care about me."

That's not true. That is not true, but we have a finite amount of time and energy too, and this would be like telling you that you suddenly had to do nine extra papers for one class to pass the class. We won't do that to you. You can't do that to us.

The other thing about this is, it's not just about our workload, although that's certainly a big part of it. It's also about fairness to everybody in the class. I had a student, early in my career who had basically bombed the class. They had a - I want to say they had a 66%, back when I was still doing percentage grading. They would have needed four additional points just to get to a C-minus and they wanted a C. So they wanted me to basically bump their grade by 10 percentage points.

And they came in and I said, "Look, you need to understand that's not going to happen."

And they're all, "Well, I was in class every day!"

And I said, "That's nice. That's not part of what your grade is based on. I'm not legally allowed to do that. Attendance can't count for that."

And they said, "Well, I still want a C, 'cause I need a C for my major" - they were in a different major.

And I said, "I can't give you that."

They're all, "Well, I want you to change the rules so that I can get the C I need."

And I said "That would be unfair to the other students."

And they said, "Well, I don't care about the other students. I only care about me."

Okay, get out of my office. That was the point at which I told them to get out of my office. And that student was angry enough with me that I wouldn't bend the rules for them, that they threatened me, next to my car, about six weeks later and said, "I'll just have to tell my son what your car looks like."

Students, that's an overreaction. It's not okay to do that. And it's not okay to say "I don't care about the other students. I only care about me." That may be the case, but don't tell us that. Don't tell us that, 'cause that's a great way to make us remember you - and not in kind ways.

Dinur: Right. And if you ever want us to write a letter of recommendation for you, okay, what do you think we're going to be more willing to write for - a student who earned a B, but worked on improving and learning, or the student who demands an A and demands that we bend the rules for them? Who's going to make that better impression on us, when we write that letter?

Adam: So we focused a lot of this towards the students this time. But let's talk about how teachers can use this information about talking about grades.

So the first thing is, teachers, be kind but be firm. Understand that yeah, the students are stressing. We've talked a lot about how students stress out about grades in previous episodes, and part of the stress, and we've also talked about it here, is applying old ways of thinking - a fixed mindset, and assuming that a grade is a reflection of who they are, instead of emphasizing what they need to succeed, which is a growth mindset. So to curtail these grade-grubbing episodes, start at the beginning of class and keep reminding them, "Remember, I am not focusing on your grade as a reflection of who you are. I'm focusing on only as a measure of how much you've learned already and how much more you need to learn."

But also be okay with saying, ‘You know what? We're going to discuss this grade at a future time and let cooler heads prevail.’ Remember, we don't judge our students as people based on their grade, but students are very used to judging themselves based on their grades, based on their achievements. And they may need some time to get out of that mindset. So give them patience, give them respect, and they will give the same back to you, for the most part.

Dinur: Remind your students, and let them know, that they are far more than their grades. Right? The grades reflect something very, very specific. I tell my students before each test your tests, show me how much of the material you're comfortable with, how much are able to analyze. It doesn't tell me anything more than that. So if you do badly on a test, I don't think of you as a dumb student. I just think, “Okay, it wasn't your day. Maybe there's some material that just isn't clicking or something came up. What can we do so that test two is a little bit better, you know?”

Be honest if you review a paper or a test, but also emphasize improvement in progress: “Let's see where you made your mistakes so that these aren't repeated.”

In previous episodes I've said “I don't like to repeat my mistakes. I like to make new ones.” Oh, make new mistakes, learn more.

And I mentioned how I handle my grade appeals. I, the students obviously assume that if they appeal that it automatically means the grade goes up, because that's what they want. It's their confirmation bias. Uh, but I also tell my students, maybe I read over your paper, I look over that test and I say, “You know what? Oh, I think the grade that you were given pretty accurately reflects the quality of work given. So I'm not changing the grade.” That doesn't go up. It doesn't go down.

Or for students that want me to regrade an entire assignment, but don't explain why, well, maybe I'm going to find a few more mistakes that I didn't ding you for, that the TA didn't ding you for, and that grade's going to go down. So there is a procedure.

And I do want to be fair, so I do allow appeals, but I want the issue for the appeal to be put in writing so that I know what I'm looking for. And what this does is, it likely weeds out the students who are trying to effectively throw a dart at a board and seeing if they can hit, you know, the grade-change bullseye.

Adam: Now students, the way you can use this is, first, RELAX! A bad test or a bad paper or a bad assignment? it's just a bad test or a bad paper or a bad assignment. It means maybe it wasn't your day, like Dinur was saying, maybe it just didn't click. It says nothing about who you are.

If you're not happy with a grade, focus on what you did or didn't turn the grade and what you can change to earn a higher grade. Focus on your own development and your own growth and your own learning. Don't focus on the score. Don't focus on the letter grade. It's not the end of the world. I know you've been trained by high school to believe that any grade lower than an A is the end of the world. That is not the case.

And again, remember lots of teachers have lots of students all at the same time. In most classes there's anywhere from 25 to 200 students versus one instructor, so we can't keep track of everybody's grades and certainly not off the top of our heads. I had a student wait until I packed everything up. My laptop was in my backpack. All my stuff was together. And he came up and said, “I'd like to find out what my grade is.”

I'm all, “Did you just not see me pack everything up? I don't know what your grade is.”

"But you always know what our grades are!"

"No, I don't. I have no idea - a, who you are; b, off the top of my head, I couldn't tell you what your grade is, but I've told you how to figure out your grade. Go figure it out." If you give your teachers patience and respect, they'll do the same to you, but don't demand that we do things like pull your grade out of our head when there are 200 of you in a class. That's really not realistic.

Dinur: Remember, the teachers are not your enemy. We want to see you succeed in our classes and in other classes and in order to do that, figure out what we're looking for, right? How is my grade determined? It's always going to be on the syllabus and if it's confusing at the beginning of a semester, that's a really good time to come and ask us because that helps you be a better student. It helps us be better teachers. If we say, "Okay, there was something that wasn't very clear about this assignment. How can I rephrase this so that this confusion doesn't happen again?"

Each teacher, each professor, has their own standards that they want and expect students to meet, and as professors we want to help students reach that standard. Here's the minimum you need to show me to pass this class. Okay, if you want, now that's a C. if you want the B, here's what I'm looking for. Do you want that? A, here's what you've got to do.

Adam: And teachers, you do have to be transparent about this. A lot of us are still giving paper assignments that say "6 pages, 12 point font, one inch margins, Times New Roman, black ink, white paper," and that's literally all the guidance the students get about what we're looking for. We did a recent episode on rubrics, I think it was episode, what was it, 43? Yeah, Episode 43 - go back and listen to that, because that will tell you how to tell the students, this is what I'm expecting you to do.

Dinur: For students, look at failure (in quotes or out of quotes), as subjective failure versus objective failure as a way of starting something new. But now, now when we say "subjective" and "objective," subjective is: you got a B-minus on a test and you're furious that you didn't get an A.

Now, did you fail that test? Hell no. You did a pretty good job, but you didn't do as well as you'd like.

The objective failure is: you got 50%. That's an objective failure. You didn't do very well on this. You showed that you got about half of the material or half of the skills or half of the concepts, the other half just didn't click.

So again, think of this as a way of starting over, but now smarter. You bombed the first test in a class? Figure out what the problem is, you know? Was it the material didn't click? Were you not able to spend enough time studying? When you studied, how did you study? Were you just reading through the book and over notes, or were you using flashcards? Were you talking to other people? Yeah, you have to be honest with yourself and with your teachers. If they ask you this, and if the problem would say how to manage time for studying, well now you know that you've got to change that up the second time you - or for the second test in that class, right? Maybe it's "I need to spend more time" or maybe "I'm happy that I studied for six hours, but instead of doing it the night before, I'm going to do an hour a day for six days leading up to that test." You know, doing so and showing us improvement speaks a lot louder and a lot more favorably to us as teachers than going "This grade is unfair!"

Adam: Now, if you do want to appeal a grade, be clear with where you see a mistake that you should get points back for, because that lets us know what to look for. The more vague your appeal is, the more we get, "well,

this grade is just unfair” or “I don't like my grade” or “I'm going to lose my scholarship” and you're not telling us why we should change your grade? The less likely we are to afford points back. There's a difference between saying, “Look, I wrote the answer for question two right here and you said, I didn't answer it at all.” Okay, we'll fix that, versus “I'm appealing this grade because it was not fair,” okay?

The first one actually tells us something concrete we can look at and correct; the second? You're trying to throw a Hail Mary pass to get a higher grade and that's all it's doing. It's not telling us anything about what went wrong and how to fix it.

Dinur: And the unfair complaints really come off as disrespectful to us. Like we have nothing better to do except to be really petty at one up to hundreds of students for reasons we may not even, you know, be aware existed. It's apparently petty Sunday, seven days a week.

Adam: And when a student says something like, “You must hate me for something I said in class two weeks ago” -

Dinur: What did you say? Like, I don't know about Adam, but I barely remember what a student said two hours ago or two days ago, let alone two weeks. We have so many students, we have so many classes, that unless something was really outlandish and we gave you a “Whooooo” look in class? Yeah, we're probably not going to remember you made a mistake answering a question in class. Cool. We've moved on from it. We assume you've done the same too.

Adam: And you know what, that makes me think - in the show notes, I will put a link from a Medium article that I send to a lot of my students who say “I'm really shy and I'm scared to make a mistake in class,” that will help you understand why most of us don't remember other people's mistakes, but we always remember our own, and we think everybody else does too. And it'll help you understand if this, this is your problem. Nobody's going to remember your mistakes.

So that's what we have for you in Episode 47. 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.

Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 48, when Adam and I discuss grades and self-worth, and why so many students feel like your self-worth depends on your grades.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!

