



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

Episode 48 - Grades and Self-Worth

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

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

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 48, Grades and Self-Worth.

Dinur: In Episode 21, Adam and I discussed that grades in college mean something different than what they meant in high school. In college, a grade on an assignment or test shows us one thing only - that is how comfortable you are with the skills, with the material in a class up until that point. Cs show us that you're a competent student (and remember, that's enough to earn a degree). Bs show us that you go the extra mile and you provide more effort than others. And As show us true excellence on a project, a paper, or a test.

Adam: And yet most students don't believe us when we tell them, "I'm fine with you getting a C, I'm fine with you getting a B. I'm not going to judge you for that."

And that's because our society overemphasizes scores. It likes numerical scores. In the real world, a lot of people will measure you by how much money you make in school. Ever since school became a required activity for children and teens, what your grade was is more important than what you did to get it. The message that our society has repeatedly sent, for at least two decades if not more, is: "the better your grades are, the better a person you are."

But is that really the truth? Back in Episode 5 we discussed Carol Dweck's growth mindset and fixed mindset. And for those of you who have not yet listened to Episode 5, first, go listen to it. But if you don't have time, the main points of the growth mindset and fixed mindset is that a growth mindset focuses on the work, not on the results, and it assumes that effective work increases your ability and thus eventually you'll get better results.

The fixed mindset, which is the one that our society really has installed in most people over the years - it focuses only on results and it assumes that whatever you did came out of some innate or inborn ability that you had. So if you are labeled "smart," then you are expected to just be smart. And the fixed mindset, if it sees a threat to that label, like smart, it avoids any activity that might prove the label is correct, which means people

who believe that their ability to get things done is innate, do less well than people who believe that their ability to get things done is based on the work they do and how well they do it.

Dinur: And that, inevitably leads a lot of procrastination, because if you can't do this project perfectly, if you can't get 100% on this test, then what's the point of studying?

Adam: And that brings us into what we'll talk about in Episode 49, where we're going to specifically talk about perfectionism.

Dinur: Mm-hm.

Adam: But right now, Dinur and I are going to focus on mainly the self-worth thing and how we've tied it up with grades. It's a sort of a lead-in to Episode 49.

Dinur: Now, remember, your grades do not tell us anything - anything about who you are as a person. Your grades just tell us how you did in a class at one point in time. What does that mean? Well, it means that your grades are not who you are.

We don't see a student and go, "Well, there's the B-minus student. They only earned 82% my class." No. And we have hundreds of students. So if we see you, we don't think of your grades. Maybe we know something about your lives. You know, it could be, "Hey, I know this person's a really big Dodgers fan. I know this student of mine really loves heavy metal." They feel comfortable sharing something about us.

Maybe we only see them in their role as a student, like, we know that you took a class with us. We might not even remember which class.

Adam: (laughs) Especially after a couple of semesters.

Dinur: Right? But we are going to remember if you were asking questions, if you participating in class, if you're trying to answer our questions -

Adam: If you showed up to office hours, if you stopped us in the halls -

Dinur: Absolutely. Like, we're going to remember these contributions. We're going to remember your engagement way more than how you did on a paper or on a test or on a quiz. Because at the end of the day, your assignments and your tests, they're what you need to do to get through the course. That's all they are. They're not who you are.

Adam: And when I tell my students this, I will say this: "You know, your teachers rarely remember the grades you get." I mean, okay, occasionally there may be a student where we're like, "Yeah, I remember their project and they got an A and they were the only group in the class that got an A," so I remember that. There are a couple of students I have that I remember that. But I also have students who - I remember them partly because I know they were struggling, but they still did the best they could and they pulled a C and I'm proud of them for that because they got to the competent level.

But apart from that, I'm not judging you on the grade you got; Dinur's not judging you on the grade you got; your teacher, Dr. Martinez is not judging you on the grade you got. And I've had students tell me they don't believe me, because their high school teachers judged them all the time and called them A students or F

students or D students. And I said, “Well, then your high school teachers were out of line, because that's not fair to stick that kind of label on anyone.”

Adam: Now what I have found and what Dinur has found and what a lot of researchers and writers have found over the years is that most of the time, until they get some kind of lesson like we're trying to give you in this podcast, most students see grades as a judgment of the self. So if you get good grades, then you think you're worthy and if you have bad grades then you think you're unworthy or that you're worthless. And that my bad grade means I am a bad person or a bad student. That is a fixed-mindset view.

Adam: And so I'm kind of with Carol Dweck here - she's the one who wrote the book *Mindset* - that the fixed mindset is one of the worst things that has happened to learning and education in our society, because too many people are focused only on the grade, the grade, the grade, and what they think that says about them, not about what they're learning. And so if I were to give you, say a quiz on a class you're taking now, two years from now, you wouldn't remember anything. But if you got away from the fixed mindset, and started focusing on what you're learning, and making it interesting, and making it memorable, and making it something that you want to know, you'd probably get better grades too. It's kind of a paradoxical thing.

Adam: So we've got to get away from this “what grades represent to students,” this idea that “good grades mean you're worthy and bad grades mean you're not,” because that's not true.

Dinur: And one way to help you with that is to tell you what your grades represent to us, as teachers. And really a grade can show us the ability to repeat something until it's done correctly, and how far along the student takes to do it well. So, one of the things that Adam and I both do is for assignments that don't meet our standards, we'll allow students to redo that work until it passes. Oh, passes doesn't mean an A, it doesn't even mean a B, but it means that you've taken this assignment that you struggled with early on, and you kept working, and working, and working on it, until you could get a C minus or a C.

Dinur: I had students, uh, in some of my theory classes and some of my deviance classes, and some of my law classes really just bomb the term papers. And what I would do is I would tell them, “If I grade this, this is the grade this paper would earn. Do you have a different version that you'd like me to evaluate?” It was my way of asking without asking for them to redo it, because I don't want a torpedo a student's grade. I know how much students care about them, but if the work doesn't meet that standard, I'm not going to pass it. There has to be that standard that's called consistent for everyone, but I want to help my students reach it.

Adam: And teachers, this is one of the reasons why we suggest standards-based grading, so I do the same thing in my classes. The standard for passing a quiz is 70%. If you got a 69% you've got to take the quiz again. If you want to pass the term paper, at different levels of the term paper, I require that you at least get a “meets expectations.” And on the final term paper, I do demand that you get an “exceeds expectations,” because I want to see that you've actually gotten to the point where you're doing A-level work, which is superior work - very hard to achieve.

Adam: But if you need to redo it a few times to get to that standard, I'm fine with that. And so, you might want to think about instituting standards-based grading - and I'm not sure if we've already done an episode on this, but if we haven't, we'll do our best to get one to you soon - because standards-based grading allows students to repeat the task until they've actually done it correctly, which is the first thing that teachers see in terms of grading students. We see you have been able to do this until you've done it right. That's what we're looking for.

Adam: So the second thing that we see in grades, as teachers, is a way to measure a student's understanding of the material and also to measure how well the student is expressing that understanding. And teachers, this is why measuring the grades by the quality of the work instead of just the quantity of the work is really, really important.

Adam: In my standards-based grading system, for example, normally there are five quizzes. I don't expect students to pass all five of them with a 70%. They've just got to pass three of them with a 70%. In my paper sequence there are workshops about how to get started, and then there's a workshop on how to do an annotated bibliography, and then there is an annotated bibliography, and then there's a workshop on how to do a literature review based on that bibliography, and so forth. And the student can redo each one as many times as they need to, to get to a passing score.

Adam: They can't do the work until it's perfect if they've gotten a passing score. Like, if they've gotten an M, which is "meets expectations," and they say, "Well, I really want to get an E," no. Not unless it's the final paper, which the only thing I demand an E on. But everything else, it's like, "Move on with your life. You've got a 'meets expectations,' move on."

Adam: And a lot of students say, "But I'm not perfect yet!" No, you're not. And that's okay. And that's one of the things we've got to work on with our students, and we'll talk about that a little later.

Dinur: Look, your assignments and your test scores? All they are, are measures of skills. They're measures of concepts. They're measures of knowledge. And we're looking at how well you're able to build or use these skills.

Dinur: Are you able to analyze information? Are you able to take the theories that we discuss in class, and given a scenario, be able to explain how scenario one applies to theory one? If you're able to do it, that's what we care about - that you're developing these analytical skills.

Dinur: You know, if it's a math class, how well are you able to use things like, you know, different formulas in order to solve problems? Same with physics, same with chemistry. They're not telling us who you are; they're just telling us how comfortable you are with the materials and with the skills in the class up until a certain point.

Dinur: Now, something to keep in mind is that as professors, we really don't try and take any specific student's grades personally. We can't. So, I don't mean this in a way to offend, but we really don't associate a grade with you. We want our students to do well, you know, both in our specific classes and in general, but one, I mentioned earlier that we grade against a certain standard, right? We want a certain level in order to reach that "meets expectations" or a C, or going a little bit beyond that for the B, or really excelling for that "exceeding expectations" that Adam talked about, that A-level work.

Well, we have to be fair in doing so and so we often don't look at the names - at least I don't, I don't think Adam does - of who submits what paper. Like, we try and grade as neutrally as possible so that we can keep the standard as consistently as possible. And that doesn't mean that we don't care about who you are as our students. It just means that we're separating the grade you earned on that paper, on that quiz, on that test, on that presentation from who you are.

Dinur: And the way I describe my grading philosophy is, I try and be fair toward my students, which means that if I think a paper is between two grades, like a C plus and a B minus, I tend to give the benefit of the doubt in the grading to the students at least the first time, if not more so. And I try and give suggestions for future clarity.

And the way students earn that benefit of the doubt isn't by earning As on previous tests or papers. It's by being engaged with the class. If I know that you're constantly trying to answer questions, trying to ask me questions about the material, then that tells me that you care about doing well in the class. And that means that if you're a little iffy on something, I'm willing to bump you up at least that one time.

Dinur: But the flip side is if you're someone who never participates, whether that means contributing to group work, asking or answering questions in class, and you don't email me, then there's not much for me to give the benefit of the doubt on. And so who you are to us, as teachers, is more a reflection of how engaged you are with the class, rather than how successful you've been on a paper or on a test.

Adam: I want to go back to what you said about being fair and how you do that borderline thing. For me, when I'm grading, let's say, a workshop, and they're doing a workshop on creating their annotated bibliography. Well, so, in this annotated bibliography, what they have to provide me with is a citation that's formatted in the correct way for our discipline, which is ASA format. They have to provide me with an inline citation, which is the one that goes in the paragraph. And then they have to provide me a paragraph with very specific: "do this, do this, do this, do this, and you're done." And that's what I want.

Adam: And if a student has totally blown it in the paragraph, like, they've done the citations correctly, but then in their paragraph they've left out two of the four required things, that's a major problem. That's a "no benefit of the doubt here," that has to be corrected. But let's say that they just didn't italicize the name of the journal in their citations, but everything else is done right? Then that's a minor problem. And I'm going to say, "okay, this is, you know, one step off from where you need to be." But if you've done this three times and it's the only mistake I keep seeing, I'm going to let it go. I'm going to just give you a pass so that you could move on to the next thing.

Adam: But they do have to try to fix the problems. So for me, the benefit of the doubt comes in in like the second or third iteration where it's like, "okay, I've told them what to fix. They fixed 90% of it and the thing that still needs to be fixed, it's just they didn't format the journal name correctly. Not a huge deal. I'll let it go. Okay." And I'll just say, "but remember, you need to fix this when you do the next step. You know, when you do the next part of this paper project, you need to make sure that you fix that."

Adam: Now, if they've decided to stop at the annotated bib, obviously that's not going to be important. But the point is that it gave them feedback on: "Fix this." And when I think it's minor, I do put "minor" after it in, like, parentheses. See "this is minor, not a huge deal," versus "this is major. You left something out that is needed that needs to be here."

Adam: So students, this means if you get a low grade, the chances are really high that your professor has nothing against you personally. The issue is the work. It's not up to the standards that we set. Maybe you didn't understand the directions. Maybe you didn't follow the directions. Maybe you gave us a very short answer to something that we expected a paragraph or two on. Maybe you only did - I had a client who had this problem - maybe you only gave the answer to the equation, but you didn't explain what it meant, okay? So if you haven't done enough yet in Dinur's and my classes, at least, there's still room for improvement. And teachers, I really do really, really do recommend that, you know, you allow that room for improvement.

Dinur: And for students, think about this. If your response is, "I didn't do well in a class because the professor really doesn't like me," then think about a class where you got an A. Was your A only because the professor really liked you? Well, if you said no, your good grade was because of your effort in that class, then why would the grade in the low grade class be any different?

Dinur: We're trying to emphasize the fact that all your grades are, are "how well you've done with that material and those skills up until a point." They're only a reflection of that. They don't tell us who you are.

Adam: Now, Dinur and I, in this new format that we're using for the podcast, once we've talked a little bit about the problem, then we want to talk a little bit about our own experiences with that problem. And so, our own experiences with this "grades are tied to my self-worth" issue among our students, we've got a few examples for you. And they're also examples from our own experiences as students in this case.

Adam: So as I've mentioned in other episodes, I was a "gifted and talented student" back in the 70s. And this was a time when the educational world thought that "gifted" meant "across the board," meaning "if you were good at this, then you were good at everything." Well that wasn't the case - and it often isn't. So in anything that involved words, yes, I was gifted. If it was reading, if it was writing, then I was really good at it, and I was way above grade level.

Adam: But in math, I was at grade level.

Adam: And then the school moved me ahead a year in the middle of second grade and I missed pretty much everything we think of as foundational for math, like the times table, and long division, and what fractions are, and what decimals are. And ever since then I have struggled with the most basic math problems - and I'm so glad that my phone has a calculator on it. I can't even tell you.

Adam: But I also constantly felt like I must be worthless, because long division never made sense to me. And my whole identity was based on being "the smart kid." And every time I would come home with a math exam where I had gotten 40%, my mother would blow her lid. She would just, she would get so angry with me for not being smart.

And I also gave up trying really early on because being told over and over and over again that I was "smart" and I was "gifted" - it made it even worse when I got proof, in the form of my math grades, that I was so not. And even today, I struggle when I get less than perfect scores on things that I'm being rated or graded on, at least for the first few minutes. I have learned better, but there is still that first few minutes of, "Oh God, I'm the worst person in the world." So I know what this is like.

Dinur: And I know that for me, I went through this both as an undergrad student and as a graduate student says an undergrad. I remember taking an intro to psych course and an intro to economics course. And in both of those classes I remember I just bombed the first test. Like I'm talking like D level bombing. Like it was bad. Yeah.

Dinur: I started wondering, like, "does this mean I'm not cut out for school? Does this mean I'm not smart?" And well, for psych, it turns out that the first class, the first test was really on my weak spot. And for that for me was I cannot remember the parts of the brain, the different lobes. And I cannot remember the different neurochemicals and what they do. Like, it is just my weak spot. But the rest of the class made a lot more sense to me once we were talking about how psychology works in everyday life.

Dinur: For econ, I remember, the professor wrote the textbook, and I was thinking that that'd be great. Problem was, his lectures were the book, word for word, and the book didn't make sense to me, and his lectures didn't make sense to me. It took me borrowing a friend's book, it was, I think, 20 or 30 years old at the time, for econ to make any sort of sense to me.

And I know that, as a graduate student, I was taking a stats class and I was just struggling with it. The tests were just impossible for me. And I finished with the 79%. And again, there's the initial doubts of "does this mean I'm not good enough? Does this mean I cannot be a researcher?" Well, turns out I passed those classes. I didn't get A's in any of them, but I passed. And that meant that I could keep going. And so, for me, that kinda showed that, okay, I struggled with these tests, I struggled with these classes, but it's not the end of the world. You are able to keep going.

Adam: And I had a student the first year that I was teaching in grad school, where I wasn't a teaching assistant, but actually the teacher, and it was a group of about 600 freshmen and sophomores and I got up in front of the class - this was in a fall quarter class - and I said, "Welcome to college. The days of the one right answer are over now. That's not going to happen anymore." And then I gave my lecture and my introduction and all that stuff.

Adam: And I had a student who had freaked out when I said that getting the one right answer was not going to be a thing in college anymore. They followed me all the way back to my office, which was like two buildings away, demanding the entire way that I take that back - because getting the one right answer was the only way that they knew how to keep a 4.0 GPA, and without a 4.0 GPA, they were worthless.

Adam: When I got them to kind of talk about it, it turned out that they had had enormous pressure from their family, that anything less than a perfect 100% got them things like food restriction, and being locked in their bedroom except to go to school. Like, they were horribly punished for not being perfect. So I understood their neurosis, but at the same time, I'm like, "I can't take that back, 'cause that's not how it works."

Adam: And we eventually had to put them together with a counselor in the counseling department, to try to work through some of that basically abuse-installed terror of not getting a perfect 100%, because I knew that most students were not going to get a perfect 100% of my class. It was not going to be a possible thing simply because there were skills they needed to build, and there was information they needed to absorb, and nobody does anything perfectly. That's just a myth.

Adam: But this kid really, really was married to the idea that a 4.0 is the only way to be safe. And so, if you've got that problem, please, please, please go find a counselor, please. Because nobody deserves to be treated like that just over their test scores.

Dinur: I think I've mentioned this student in previous episodes, but I remember, I had a student in one of my law classes, one of my large law classes even, and they'd earned an A on their term paper. They kept coming to my office hours. They were making the changes I asked them to make. And so I awarded them an A. They're in my office. I looked over their final draft. It was a great paper.

Dinur: And the student's first reaction was to demand why they didn't earn an A+ on the paper. And the way I give, or, the way A+s are earned in my classes are, I look at my A papers and I select the best, say, between one and five papers, if there are a lot - normally it's maybe two or three A papers that really, really, really stand out - and they earn that A-plus.

Dinur: But this student was upset and they demanded to know why they didn't earn an A-plus. And I told them, "well, I haven't seen anyone else's A papers, so I don't know how your paper compares to the other really good papers in this class." And they really weren't happy about it, 'cause they thought that they needed an A plus in order to get an A plus in the class.

Dinur: Well, turns out A-plus is not a grade that I can assign for an overall course grade. An A is the highest. So to me, it comes off as complaining for a grade that is not achievable.

Adam: And I've mentioned the student who hated that they were getting 19 out of 20 on journals because their answer to the question, "what was your muddiest point?" - meaning, what was the thing that was the most confusing? - was just, "I had no muddy points." Well, that's a "meets expectations" level. That's not an "exceeds expectations." I mean, you had no muddy points. Great, but an "exceeds expectations" on that would be something like, well, "I had a muddy point on this and I think this, this and this are the reasons why and if they're not, I'd really like some help." Okay. That exceeds the expectations. That goes beyond just answering the question, right?

Adam: So when I told this student, "Well, that's a 'meets expectations' answer. I can't give you an 'excellent' for that," they're all, "Well, I need 100% on everything."

Adam: And I said, "Why?"

Adam: And they're all, "Because if I don't have 100% then I'm not good enough!"

Adam: And I understand that, okay? I had that other student I just mentioned, the one who said "I have to get a 4.0, it has to - I have to always have perfect scores." My own upbringing - my mom was not kind to me when I did not bring home perfect scores. Like, I would bring home a 97%, and she would say, "What happened to the other three points? Are you stupid?"

Adam: So I understand that. It's a terror that a lot of students have had installed, either by teachers, or by their parents, or both. But it also installed this idea that "Good enough does not exist. It's either perfect or it's awful. There's nothing in-between." And that student, and many like them, have real trouble understanding that good enough is actually good enough.

Adam: And students who are listening, you might be one of those students, and we understand that, but now you've got to get beyond that. It's time to make the shift to "good enough is actually good enough."

Dinur: So the way students can use this is that Adam and I recommend that you change your focus a little bit. Instead of focusing on your grades by themselves, focus and trust the process of earning these grades. And again, the keyword is process.

Dinur: We're trying to instill the growth mindset in you, as far as: focus on what you're learning, focus on how you're improving, and we want to do that at the expense of the fixed mindset of "it's an A or it's nothing," all right. The growth mindset looks at improving yourself, but if you're only focusing on your GPA and what your grade is on a test or on a paper - if that's your only focus, that's a fixed mindset.

Dinur: So try to invest in yourself. Try to invest in the idea of growing and improving, and focusing on your process. And again, it takes time. Adam said, no one gets all the skills and absorbs all the knowledge at a perfect rate. It's just impossible. But you certainly can improve.

Dinur: And Adam mentioned the paradox that if you focus on this improvement, then over time you're going to see that your good grades are going to follow this. And so, it's a way to hopefully help you reduce your stress. Dinur: It's a way to help you be proud of yourself for growing and for putting in the effort, and you'll hopefully

also see the results that you're looking for. Let your improvement and let that growth be the source of your pride. Don't focus on the grade themselves.

Adam: So it's great for us to suggest that you do that, but it might help to know how. So there are three main views that students have that need to be changed: the view of the grades, the view of the self, and then the view of ability or behavior or action or effort. So we're going to talk about different ways to change your view in each of these three areas.

Adam: Now when it comes to grades, we've said this before, but I'll say it again. See the grade as one point in time. It is not your entire life. It is not your entire world. I had one student who obsessed over a 10-point quiz because they only got a six out of 10 and it's like, "There are nine of these quizzes in this class. Why are you freaking out about one quiz?"

Adam: "Well, because right now I'm a D student!"

Adam: "No you're not. You just got a six out of 10 on one quiz. That's all it is. So what did you do wrong? You know what happened, where were your mistakes?"

Adam: Treat your grades as much as you can on individual assignments as practice sprints for the race. So the race might be for your class, you may have a class where you're writing a bunch of little papers, and then you have a big final paper, and the big final paper is worth a lot of your grade. You're practicing for that final paper. So each of these sprints that you're doing, these small papers that you're writing, not a huge deal in terms of your final grade.

Adam: So try to treat each grade as just a single point in time: "At this point in time on September 9th, that's how I was doing." "On October 17th that's how I was doing." And you might be able to identify things that got in the way. Dinur said to me something about how he drops the worst grade of, you know, the worst exam, because they might've just been having a rotten day that day.

Adam: And I don't require you to finish all five of the quizzes. You just need to do three well enough to get on with your life. So see the grade as a single point in time, like taking your temperature - it does nothing about your overall health.

Dinur: So I don't necessarily drop the lowest test, but if I see improvement, across those three tests, and I had students who started out by failing my first test and then they worked their way up either to a C by test three or to a C on test two and a B- on test three, then I tend to bump them up if they're borderline between two grades because I want to reward that improvement. So I don't completely ignore the one bad test, but I also don't try and let it dictate the overall course grade if I'm seeing improvement.

Dinur: But there's an article on Huffington post that we've linked to in the show notes and this article says that remember that good grades do not mean perfect grades. I want to emphasize that. Good is not the same as perfect, and many times perfect becomes the enemy of good. And again, we're going to talk about that a lot more in Episode 49 when we talk about avoiding perfectionism.

Dinur: But we set this idea up that if it's not perfect, it's not good and that's not accurate. So earning a B, that's actually a really, really good grade. It shows us that you went above and beyond what it takes to show us that you're competent at something. A C is also a good grade because a C tells us that you're competent student, and remember C's do, in fact, get degrees.

Dinur: And look, if you're not thinking about school after your undergrad career is over, then literally no one cares what your GPA was. You are never going to go into a job interview where they say, "Well, we would hire you, but we look for people with a 3.3." They're going to say, "Okay, we called up your school. You did, in fact graduate. What skills are you bringing to this workplace?"

Dinur: Now, if you are thinking about law school or medical school or grad school and your grades aren't perfect? Well, almost no one's grades are perfect. And in Episode 37, Adam and I talked about applying to grad school. If you're really thinking about this, look at incoming classes' GPAs, and look if you're comparable, right? Maybe a school has an incoming GPA of 3.2 and you're at a 3.3. Yeah, you're very competitive with them. Or they have a 3.5 - a high B-plus low A-minus average - and you're at a 3.3 or 3.4, well that's still pretty damn competitive with them.

Dinur: But if you feel like you're behind, if you feel like, "Hey, I've got a 3.1 and they're looking for a 3.6," take a year or two after to work and to build up your work experience. And when you apply to graduate schools - whether that's law, whether that's medical, whether that's a for a PhD - explain how you developed some of these skills in school and how you've put them to use outside of the classroom.

Dinur: And when you write your personal statements, you're emphasizing your growth and your development rather than your actual grades.

Adam: Now last things about grades. Try to see the grade as a measure of your knowledge or a measure of your skills. It's not of you as a person. And try to police your language about this a little bit. Don't say "I'm a good student" or "I'm an A student," because that's focusing on a label that's very fixed. Instead say, "I am good at writing assignments because I can do this and this and this," or in math "I know how to do these kinds of equations. They make sense to me because I've done this and this and that."

Adam: Focus on what you can do and how much you know. Try not to focus on what kind of person that supposedly makes you - and you will need to call yourself on this at first, because you're used to saying, "I'm an A student," which means "I'm a good person." No, try this. "I'm an A student and I'm a good person," and then you could say, "I work hard and I'm a good person. I work effectively and I'm a good person." See if you can substitute in other things that aren't "I'm a ____ kind of person in school and that makes me a good person." Try to remove that from your vocabulary.

Dinur: Exactly. You're focusing on what you're learning and how you're improving, rather than just on the end result.

Adam: Now, when it comes to how you look at yourself, this is tough, okay? You've learned how to look at yourself over years and years and years. But the first thing that you've got to stop doing, in order to look at yourself: stop comparing yourself to anyone who isn't you.

Adam: Dinur and I don't compete, all right? We don't like wave our publications in each other's faces and say, "Ha ha! I've got more than you do." Okay? A, that's really childish, and B, it doesn't matter, all right? Because he works in a different area than I do. So who cares?

Adam: And you've got to learn how to compare yourself only to yourself. The only person you're competing with is the person you were yesterday. How much effort did that person that you were yesterday give to the

work? Can you give more effort or better effort or more effective effort today? That's your competition. So if your last quiz was a 70% you're competing with that. Can you better that score on your next quiz? Can you get a 75? Can you get a 71? Even that's better, right? But you've got to learn that the only person you're competing with is the person you see in the mirror every morning.

Dinur: Now, we do expect you to try your best in our classes. We're not telling you this as an excuse to slack off. But in your classes, give us your best, your most sincere effort, and be honest when you didn't do your best. Why didn't you do your best? Maybe you didn't study effectively. We have that whole series on time management to try and help you. Okay? Maybe some of the material just didn't click, but new material will.

Dinur: But remember when we say do your best, it is your best. It is subjective. It is what you can do. We're not looking at perfection. We're not looking at an objective standard and saying, "Why didn't I get an A?" We're saying what could I have done better or what can I do better for the next assignment or the next test that's coming up? How can I improve just a little bit?

Adam: And that's hard for some of us. I know, I mean for me, because I was raised with the "gifted and talented" label, I was told that only a hundred percent is good enough. So when I would try really, really hard and I would study hard and I would get a 90% or an 80% or 70% - or 40% - I would beat myself up, because obviously I couldn't have done the best, because I didn't do it perfectly. The problem is my best in math is not the same as someone's best in math for whom math comes easy. And there were people for whom math came so easy. It was like breathing for them. But when it came to reading assignments or writing assignments, they were struggling. And if they compared themselves to me, who was gifted in writing, of course they were going to feel like they weren't doing their best.

Adam: Just like I was comparing myself to them and thinking, why is it that Matt can get perfect scores in math and I - and I suck at it. Why? Well, because I'm not as good at math, and I also missed all that foundation. But I never took that into consideration. I always judged myself against an impossible standard.

Adam: And being "gifted and talented" - the students who were given that label, especially if you were one of those students who were told you were "smart" or you were "gifted" or you were "talented," and then you got a bad grade, it probably felt like the end of the world. Because we were so married to that label, that label of "gifted." We wore it like a badge. We were the smart kid, right? Sometimes we were the teacher's pet. And then we would bomb a math test, or do badly on an essay, and suddenly everything that our identity was based on went kaboom. And we'll link to a couple of different articles that we found in the show notes from people who had that label.

Adam: And as you can tell, I've been kind of riffing on this because I've been through it, but the label does not determine who you are. So you got to get away from the view of self as a label because all that's going to do is say, "When you don't live up to this label, obviously you have no self." And that is just soul-destroying. So try not to do that to yourself.

Dinur: And the last part is, you want to find areas of life that are not graded in order to make you feel worthy, effectively find stuff that gets you as far away from grades as the only marker of what you do well. Start a hobby that could be volunteering at an animal shelter. It could be working with the homeless, it could be cleaning up the area. Maybe it's some kind of art that you're not doing for a class. Maybe you were playing this sport for fun.

And get to know people who share this hobby with you so that you can spend some time and enjoy your life with them. So for example, I know I've mentioned in the past that I do sports photography as a hobby. It's something I've done for a really, really long time. Now, if we're being completely honest on this program, I do criticize the hell out of myself for it. Maybe my timing feels off for a game, or my composition isn't just where I want it to be. So then I go, if I'm going 'Well, okay, if my timing is a little off, what can I do to improve? Am I shooting a little too quickly or a little after the fact? Uh, what can I do in order to improve the framing in my shots?'"

Dinur: So, it's not something that gets graded. I'm never going to submit my photos, you know, to someone and say, "please give me an A on this, a shot that I took." But doing this? Well, it allows me to not think about grades, whether I'm a teacher or whether I'm a student because I'm just focused in the moment on something else. It takes my attention somewhere else and I'm not thinking about what other people think of me.

Adam: And for me, one of my hobbies is actually this podcast. I've learned a ton about audio editing and creating intros and all that stuff. You know, I constantly, I'll say to Dinur, "Nope, that kind of stretched out and I need to rerecord that. Say that again," because I am now focusing on the quality of the podcast. And I want to say here too, we have had some issues with audio that has not been editable, but we are working on that. So I just wanted to make that clear. But even if we weren't making it, making those changes, this is my hobby. Doing this podcast as part of what I do, because it's fun, and I love the fact that I'm communicating with people about stuff I care about. Does anybody grade me on this podcast? Maybe the ratings that we get on Apple podcasts, but that's not a measure of me. That's not a measure of my worthiness. It's just a measure of how much somebody enjoyed the podcast.

Adam: So the third big view is the view of things like effort and ability and action and behavior - what you're doing. And so the first thing that we suggest is, focus on your strengths. What do you already do? Well. So if the assignment had a rubric, look at the rubric and compare it to what you did. Did you write well? Do you have accurate citations? Did you follow through on your calculus equations with explanations of what the results meant? Good! Keep doing those things. Keep improving on them because this is what you already do well, so play to your strengths.

Dinur: Now, we mentioned being honest with yourself about your best effort and part of that effort is focusing on your weaknesses and figuring out how to strengthen them. So for example, on a paper, on rough drafts, I'll give feedback saying, "Hey, you really need to strengthen your thesis by doing this," or "You really need to bring in more background here," or "You need to develop this idea a little bit more." So look at the comments that your professors give you and ask yourself, "Okay, this was a draft. How am I going to address this for the next time? How am I going to fix this for when that final draft is due, when that's worth so much more of the grade than this one rough draft?"

Adam: Also when it comes to failing, fail productively. When you fail - and you will, because everybody does! - look at what happened and look at what you could do differently the next time to change the outcome. So are there words you just habitually misspell? Write them down on a list and check for those words every time you write something just to make sure you spelled it right. Is there a procedure in your chemistry labs that just isn't clicking? Go find a tutor and get some help. Are you having real trouble sticking to a schedule? Well, we have a time management series, and maybe you need a coach for outside accountability to help you learn how to manage your time effectively. So fail productively, identify the problems, and then do something about them.

Dinur: So, one of the ideas that Adam and I would like to introduce you to is the idea of pre-mortems. Well, we've all heard of post-mortem, which is after something's done. What a premortem is, when you face a task

like a big term paper, pretend you finished it and you failed, right? You just absolutely bombed it. List everything that caused that failure. Right. Did I not include enough scholarly sources? Did I write this two nights before it was due?

Adam: Did I miss a thesis?

Dinur: Yeah! Yeah, did I miss a thesis. Did I forget a conclusion?

Dinur: So think of everything that could have caused that failure, and reverse engineer your way with ways to address these things as you're doing the task. So, instead of writing that paper two nights before it's due, write it three weeks before it's due. Were you told you need to fix a thesis? Have you actually looked at your thesis statement and made some changes to it?

Adam: Now, also be realistic. Not everyone is cut out to be a computer science major or a physics major, or, for that matter, a music major! And it's okay if a class is harder than you thought it was going to be. Does it play to your strengths? If not, maybe it's not the class you should base your major on. And that also means it's okay to get grades lower than an A in a class that isn't playing to your strengths. That's totally fine.

Dinur: Now, a lot of us have heard, "well, maybe you just need to work harder," but working harder isn't helpful if you're really struggling with the class. If the amount of time and energy that you're spending isn't giving you the results that are proportional to your effort, maybe you need to say, "okay, this class isn't my best area" or "this major isn't my best area," and it's okay to admit that there are areas where you generally won't do as well, even within your major. You might be really, really, really interested in criminology or in sociology or in physics or in chemistry, but just part of it doesn't click for you. That's life. It doesn't mean you're a bad person.

Adam: I had a student once who said, "why are we talking about all this stupid race stuff? I'm taking a sociology class!"

Adam: I'm all, "That's part of it."

Adam: And they're all, "well, I don't like talking about race." Okay. They were very, very resistant to anything that suggested that being white gave them an advantage, and they didn't want to hear it, and that is a weak spot. I think that one could be strengthened, but everyone has weak spots and not all of them can be strengthened. If you have a learning disability that affects your reading ability, reading is never going to be a strong point for you. Stop beating yourself up. Find help for it.

Adam: Now, the way that teachers can use this. First, you've got to tell your students that for you, at least, grades are not how you measure whether they're a worthy student or a worthy person, and you also have to demonstrate it. You've got to explain what grades mean to you in terms of skills and in terms of knowledge, and just emphasize over and over again: "It's not about whether you are a worthy person or not. That is not how I look at your grades." You've got to be honest about that too. You've got to be sincere about it because students can tell if you're lying.

Dinur: And as a teacher, please don't use the terms "good student" or "smart." And we know that you think you're doing good by complimenting the student, but by calling a good student a "good student" or a smart student, well, those are really fixed-mindset terms and encourage a view that grades measure worthiness. Instead, change it up, and instead of saying "they're a good student," or "smart," say "they really put forward a really strong effort in my class. They worked hard, they worked effectively." Things that encourage that growth

mindset, that focus on improving, that focus on growth, rather than just the grade itself. And Adam and I have mentioned Carol Dweck's fixed and growth mindset from Episode 5, and we're going to link that in the show notes.

Adam: Also, students who react badly to less than perfect grades, like the student who insisted that they needed it to be one right answer 'cause they had that to have that 4.0, and then revealed that they had been pretty severely abused by their parents for not getting perfect grades - they might need counseling, they might need other help to get through this fixed mindset conditioning and into a more growth mindset view. So, know where the resources on campus are so you could point them at them. You know, tell them, "Look, this is really upsetting you. I think you might want to go and talk to a counselor in the counseling center, because I don't think this is entirely just about the grades. I think there's something deeper going on here, 'cause you're so upset." And point them at those places on campus, so that they can get the help they need.

Dinur: And in your classes, have a focus on learning, not on grades. Maybe this means you allow students to drop their lowest test score, or you allow several resubmissions so that students can improve their scores. Effectively, don't try and just do a one-and-done approach and say, "Okay, you had this one test. That's it. You had this one chance at the paper and that's it." Try and offer opportunities for improvement.

Adam: Yeah, the best way to kill learning is to structure a class "three exams and one paper." That's like, even before you start, you've already told the students, "All I care about is your test scores and your paper score. And I don't give a damn about your learning."

Dinur: Right. Especially if you don't make the concession and say, "Okay, if you bomb a test and I see improvement, will I reward that?" You know, you've got to take that process into him into account. When you look at grades for the overall course: are students putting forward that effort, have they earned that benefit of the doubt and are they improving? And if they are, doesn't reward it, but don't put the emphasis on it.

Adam: So that's what we have for you in Episode 48. 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 49, when we'll talk about how to avoid perfectionism.

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Adam: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

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Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!