



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

Episode 49 - How to Avoid Being a Perfectionist

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

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

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 49 - How to Avoid Being a Perfectionist

Dinur: Now, in a previous episode I mentioned a student who'd done really, really, really well in one of my classes. Like, I remember them very, very well - but I don't necessarily remember them 100% fondly. And I realize that sounds mean. But this student was extremely high-achieving. He would come into my office hours every week to go over his term paper. And so far? Perfect! Like, that is the kind of student I really like working with. They're motivated, they're dedicated. I'd seen him do the work. He had done excellent work, and I awarded him an A.

Dinur: And his reaction was to immediately ask me why he didn't get an A+ on this paper.

Dinur: Well, one, the way I assign my A-pluses is, I compare all of my A-level papers and I pick the two or three best As, and I add a few extra points to them. He was the first person to submit his paper to me. I didn't have anyone to compare his paper against. So I could say he exceeded my expectations. He wrote an excellent paper. But I don't know that it's going to be one of the two or three best in his class of over a hundred students, if I don't have anyone to compare it to.

Dinur: And he got really, really upset with that. Well, it turns out he wanted an A+ in the class overall, but there's a slight problem. At my school, an A is the highest grade that we can offer. So for me, he's complaining about a grade that he's physically not ever going to be able to achieve, because the system doesn't allow that grade to be entered.

Dinur: And so, on the one hand I remember him well because I was impressed with his dedication and I remember his work ethic, but I really didn't like - it rubbed me the wrong way - that he was grade-grubbing for this, and he was grade-grubbing, in part, because he may have felt that he couldn't be anything less than perfect.

Adam: And the thing about it is, I understand that student because I've had both students like him and I have been that student - that student who was absolutely terrified of the idea that I'm getting anything less than a perfect grade. Now, in my case, it's related to having been abused in my childhood. I'll be honest about that. And there were times when I would come home from school with a 97% on an exam and instead of being congratulated on my A, I would be asked where the other three points were. And when you get that kind of response from the people who you feel you need to impress with your grades, it can really do a number on your head.

Adam: And we're going to talk about an actual movement in education that conditioned students to look at grades in exactly this way. Which is why, even now, we're seeing so many students coming through college and even in high school going, "But what about those other three points? If I didn't get a perfect 100%, then I'm not good enough."

Dinur: And part of that comes from the way kids were raised. I know that we're going to discuss the idea of helicopter parents in this episode. They're called "helicopter parents" because they constantly hover near their child, making sure that nothing bad can happen to them. And before I became a professor, I used to work as a tutor. And I hated, hated dealing with helicopter parents.

Dinur: I remember one especially well. I was working with their son. The son was in, I want to say, about third grade, maybe second grade. And we're working on basic math, you know, and addition and subtraction. And his mom would constantly chime in from a different room about what I was doing wrong, or why she didn't like it. And at one point I confronted her because I wasn't tutoring for free. So I said, "Look, you're paying me this money to teach your son, but you really don't like how I'm teaching. So if you're gonna pay me, let me teach how I want to teach. And if you don't like the way I'm teaching, why are you paying me?"

Adam: I had a coaching student, a coaching client whose mom said to me, "You're not going to teach my son to disobey what I want him to do, are you?" Her son was 22! And that's a helicopter parent as well. The parent who just can't let go, who cannot give up control. And the thing is, I'm not blaming helicopter parents, but I am saying if you are a helicopter parent, you need to stop doing that, because it's damaging your kid.

Dinur: Turn the rotors off.

Adam: Mm-hmm. Land, and and let them walk.

Adam: Now why do students feel like perfectionism is required? Well, Dinur and I just touched on the two main reasons. We're going to share some quotes with you from former students of mine about the idea that mistakes are bad, that making a mistake is bad. And, so, these are just different students who have said to me over the years, you know, "this is how I feel about making a mistake" or "this is how I, at least I felt about making a mistake until we did a workshop on why mistakes are necessary for learning."

Adam: So one student said, "I had the idea that if I made a mistake, it was going to cost me a lot."

Dinur: "Making a mistake meant that I was inferior compared to the rest of the class."

Adam: And a third student said, "I thought it meant that the professor wouldn't let me forget my mistake, and that I would always have it thrown in my face."

Dinur: "I always thought that making a mistake was doing something wrong."

Adam: And “I thought making a mistake meant that I was failing the class and basically that I was always wrong.”

Dinur: “Making a mistake proved to me that I'm just not as smart as the people around me.”

Adam: “Making a mistake meant that it couldn't be fixed and no amendments could be made.”

Dinur: “I thought making a mistake meant I was not intelligent enough to get it right the first time.”

Adam: And the last of the students said, “I used to think it was the end of the world if I made a mistake.”

Adam: These kind of seem like outsized responses to simple mistakes. I mean, we're not talking about blowing it on a test. We're talking about raising your hand in class, not having the right answer and feeling like you are the worst person in the world - like the world has absolutely ended.

Adam: Well, here's the problem. There are two big sources of student perfectionism that I've identified in research that I'm still working on: The self-esteem movement and helicopter parenting, as we've just talked about.

Adam: So the self-esteem movement started in the late 60s, with a publication in 1969 by Nathaniel Branden. It was called *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, but the self-esteem movement really got going in the 1980s.

Adam: Now, what I'm about to talk about is taken from notes from a presentation that I did at a conference with a colleague, probably four years ago, I would say. And this misguided movement, the self-esteem movement? It told children that they were winners just for existing. It rewarded everyone on every team with a trophy - even if their team lost - and it completely missed the mark.

Adam: Because what it did is something that we try not to do in science. It said, “Oh! That thing is a cause!” when it was actually an effect. Because the problem is that self-esteem is the product, or the result, of making mistakes and learning and succeeding - after some struggle.

Adam: But the self-esteem movement fundamentally missed that mark. They did not understand this. So rewards for doing nothing were very common up to and through the 1990s.

Adam: Now, when we look at the scientific literature from and after this period, we see this repeated assumption that self-esteem has to happen first and then you get increased skills and resilience. So their belief was that self-esteem causes better academic skills, better coping skills and on and on and on. But what the California Task Force, and all the programs that were spawned by the report that it put out, failed to understand is that self-esteem is not a cause. It's an effect of better academic learning and other skills. And those skills are learned through a process of making mistakes, learning from the mistakes, and proceeding on after the mistakes.

Adam: Children don't need a bootcamp-level of stress from mistakes to produce confidence and self-esteem. But the problem is, from the literature that we've got, it seems that the self-esteem movement interpreted any negative outcome and any failure as a bootcamp level of negativity and disappointment, and moved in all innocence to protect children from having any of these experiences - as if the teacher saying, “No, John, that's

not the right answer” was the same thing as a drill sergeant screaming abusive invective at a brand new recruit.

Adam: Now, this did not go without some pushback. A lot of researchers objected to this rapid connection that was being drawn between self-esteem as a cause and academic achievement as an effect, even as early as the 80s, but the movement was just way, way too strong.

Dinur: So, I think I've mentioned in previous episodes that when I lecture, I throw out a lot of questions at my students - and for my students who are listening, now you know what I'm talking about! And I'm not doing that to sound smarter than anyone in the room, but one, I want to know what my students know and don't know. And I want to gauge that in real time. But I have students who are afraid of speaking. So some will email me, some don't. And the reason they don't say, “I didn't want to make a mistake in front of you know, in front of the teacher (in front of me) or in front of my peers.”

Dinur: And I said, “Look, we're all in the business of making mistakes. If you don't get the answer right in lecture, you don't lose any points.” And in fact, I go over and I'll say, “okay, well here's why this is either the right answer or here's where this was - here's where I can see the mistake being made.” You know, it's a low-stakes way of saying, “Okay, you weren't quite sure about that. Let's get you strengthened up. Let's get you shored up on this material and we can then move on.”

Adam: But the problem is that the self-esteem movement really installed in the minds of students - and, in some ways, teachers - that there's no such thing as a low-stakes anything. Everything is high-stakes. Everything is an existential crisis for these kids and young adults, who honestly believe that any mistake is, as one of my students said, “the end of the world.”

Dinur: Oh, and let's not forget that - remember, these kids are also coming from - these students, I should say, are coming from - a high-stakes standardized tests environment where their school funding is tied to it. And so, yeah -

Adam: Mm-hmm.

Dinur: Mistakes should be given, you know, a low-stakes environment. There should be a safe place to be wrong. But these students aren't getting that if they're taking standardized test after standardized test. They've never gotten to experience that. And that's what we hope that our classrooms are.

Dinur: Now, we also have some from Trey Willis, whose autobiographical diatribe against the self-esteem movement, gives us a lot of examples of its outcomes, and it also helps us understand why this is such a big deal. And so first Willis, like myself, describes being allowed to fail at baseball when he was in his early teens and how that meant he was spared from an identity crisis in early adulthood.

Dinur: And Willis said, “What if I internalized adults' assurances that I'm great at baseball and belief that I was actually an amazing baseball player? What if that became a vital part of my self-identity? Any of these outcomes suggest a person who lacks self awareness and is basing their identity on external factors. I would very easily find myself acquainted with frequent and bitter disappointment as an adult after realizing that these things just were not true. Reassessing your whole identity after one of the cornerstones had been ripped out is not a quick and painless task and could be the beginnings of a pretty serious crisis of identity.”

Dinur: Willis's near-miss with baseball to him was a fortunate moment. It was something lucky. He describes the moment when you realized he was bad at baseball as “a significant and defining experience.” “I was allowed to be bad at baseball just before it was no longer acceptable to allow children to be bad at things.” Willis mentions examples from his own experience as a psychologist and counselor of students whose high self-esteem interferes with their ability to see, understand and internalize the reality of life.

Dinur: One such example is a friend of his who entered the UIT NASCAR tech program. This friend wanted to start working in the garage, which is a fairly high level position in NASCAR. It's the equivalent to being middle-management in a white collar work environment. He had two job offers right out of high school, but was told at both he was expected to start with the pit crew and work his way up to garage positions. He refused both job offers, and according to Willis, never secured a career in the industry because of his belief that he should have started at a higher position.

Dinur: Another example from Willis is a different childhood friend who dropped out of a computer engineering program and tried to start his own business. When the business failed, the friend went to work for his father's company and never tried to do anything on his own again. That was it. He took his shot and missed. He didn't dare shoot again.

Adam: And we offer these examples from Willis because they show us the effects of the self-esteem movement in terms of, first, not understanding where to start, and second, in terms of thinking that you only get one shot - and if you screw it up you can never recover from the mistake.

Adam: So that's one leg of a three-legged stool. Dinur mentioned standardized testing, which I've got tons of research on - but I'm not going to go into detail here, but yeah, standardized testing sets up the high-stakes environment - and then we have helicopter parenting. And the helicopter parent phenomenon, which is defined as “parents who over-parent and overprotect their kids,” developed hand-in-glove with the self-esteem movement.

Adam: Now, helicopter parents want to protect their children from accountability. And they are doing it with good intentions, but it is not getting the results that they want. They often go so far as to harass K-12 teachers into overlooking mistakes or ignoring behavior problems.

Adam: And there are people I've talked with, when I mention helicopter parents and they say, “Oh God, there's so many different kinds.” We have the basic helicopter parent who hovers, and then we have the Black Hawk helicopter who hovers and will fire from the air if you don't do what they want, and then there's the parents that land on the ground and try to clear the way - so we have the lawnmower parent, the bulldozer parent, and even the Zamboni parent. These are increasing levels of severity of helicopter parenting.

Adam: Now this generation of parents, and they are largely - not entirely but largely - Baby Boomers, are well known to almost any educator today. There's also a bunch of early Gen-Xers who do this too. They're the parents who demand changes in a child's grade, who email incessantly to get an audience for their grievances about the curriculum, and who refuse to allow their child to experience any adverse information, negative feedback or criticism, which might damage their child's fragile self-esteem and emotional balance.

Adam: These parents are also known for micromanaging their child's life, scheduling every minute. So the child never has free time or time alone. And the processes of helicopter parenting are well documented: over-scheduling, hovering, problem-solving, entertaining, and enmeshment, which is over-identifying with the child, to the point where the child doesn't really know where mom stops or dad stops, and he or she begins.

Adam: So to sum up helicopter parents in a nutshell, they try to do everything for their child, to make sure the child never feels pain and never experiences discomfort.

Adam: Now a fair amount of research exists for the effects of helicopter parenting, but there hasn't been a lot studied about its causes. Some proposed explanations include parents just wanting the best for their children, especially in economic or social environments that seem dangerous or uncertain. They also have a wish to protect their children from conflict. They have the feeling that a child's mistake is equivalent to a parent failing, and, of course, the desire to help their children maintain the social status that the parents have achieved.

Adam: Now, a review of literature, unfortunately, shows that helicopter parents have a detrimental effect, a negative effect, on all these student outcomes. The helicopter parents of these children and young adults, they want their kids to have high academic achievement and high feelings of self-esteem and all of that and high feelings of self-worth. But what they have is lower levels of academic and social self-efficacy, lower levels of self-worth, lower levels of well-being, lower levels of autonomy and competence, and lower levels of school engagement and identity. Helicoptered children also demonstrate what they call "maladaptive workplace scenarios", which includes relying on other people to take responsibility and opting for dependence on others over independence, and they also show very low coping strategies when they get to the workplace.

Adam: Helicoptered kids don't learn how to solve their own problems. They don't learn how to deal with mistakes or adversity, and they don't develop any of the necessary skills that the workplace requires them to have.

Adam: Now folks, we know all parents want the best for their children, but helicopter parents take this to such an extreme that they create the very situation they were trying to avoid: kids who are so unfamiliar with conflict and so unpracticed in how to handle it, that they can't make decisions without outside input and guidance because their hovering, well-intentioned parents made all the decisions, planned all the schedules, and solved all the problems - and intervened in all the potential conflicts. And as a result, the child gets no practice in solving their own problems or planning their own schedules.

Adam: Now here's some more problems that helicoptered kids have. They have higher levels of anxiety, and they have fewer tools to cope with it, compared to their parents or earlier generations. Perfectionism - here we are again with the topic of this episode - the fear of making any mistake at all is one of the worst effects of this parenting style, and it comes from the belief that children are inherently fragile and then the overprotection that results from that. And that creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Children see how protected they are and they come to believe that there must be something wrong with them if they have to be so protected. They also come to believe that if they make a mistake, it's the end of the world, because they've never learned how to deal with a mistake on their own.

Adam: And this explains the young man who came to Dinur and said, "I need an A-plus." And this also explains why Dinur didn't really understand why this kid got so upset when he couldn't get his A-plus. Because to that kid, an A-plus was the only thing between him and an existential crisis.

Adam: So between the self-esteem movement, which mandated that kids should never feel pain or sadness or negativity for anything they did or did not do; and the helicopter parents who tried to rescue their child from pain and sadness by fixing all their problems; we produce young adults who don't understand how to solve their own problems and who have so little experience with pain or mistakes that any problem at all looks like this huge insurmountable barrier. They have no experience with mistakes, they have no experience with

disappointment, and that means they have no understanding of how to cope with them and they have no understanding of what they feel like when they do cope with them. And they're really not ready for the realities of life. Because in life, disappointment or mistakes happen pretty much on the daily.

Adam: So the thing is, students, this is probably your background if you're a perfectionist. And if you're a perfectionist, your parents may have hidden you and held you and done everything they could to make sure that you tripped over nothing, that you never bumped into anything, and that any mistake you made was someone else's fault. This has not prepared you well for school. It has not prepared you well for college. It hasn't prepared you for the workforce, so if you're a perfectionist, you have a lot of stuff to get away from and it's really hard. I know. I speak as a recovering perfectionist, but you've got to let good enough be good enough. You've got to say, "Okay, I got a 97%; that's an awesome grade!" instead of, "Oh God, I got a 97%! What about the other three points? What about my 100%? What about my A-plus?" You've got to find a way to get away from that, and letting good enough be good enough is the starting point.

Dinur: I know that I've mentioned in a previous episode that I had a methods professor at the University of Connecticut, and no one ever got higher than 75% on his exams. And he said, "I always think that there's more to learn. There's always room to improve." Well, what he did was he would always scale his grades down for us, so you could earn 50% on a test and that was still good enough for an A-minus. Because for him, he was - you were showing that you are engaging with the material and that you're trying to learn. But he kind of told us, early on, "There is no such thing as perfect research. There's no such thing as knowing absolutely everything about a subject. But you can show excellence and you can show improvement."

Adam: And what you've got to do - and this is really difficult! - but if you're going into any science, even into the humanities, you've got to look at failure as your goal. You've got to look at "being curious" as what your career is about, because mistake-making is critically important to learning. It's critically important to success. But - and this is where higher education falls down - we don't represent that to our students. We don't do it in the K-12 system; we don't do it in higher ed, and we really should. We really, really should.

Adam: No new businessman comes out of school with his BBA, or even his MBA, knowing exactly how to make a business run. Look at how many startups fail in their first year, or in their first five years! And oftentimes it has nothing to do with someone making mistakes; it has something to do with making mistakes and having no idea how to deal with mistakes.

Adam: We've got to have failure as a goal, because if failure is a goal, you learn more from the failure, and a lot of people don't understand that. A lot of teachers don't understand that. It's not just students that have this problem. I - when I fail, I still go "arrgh!" for about five minutes, because I was conditioned to believe that if I didn't do it perfectly, then I didn't do it good enough. Learning how to do it "good enough" is a lifetime thing. It is not something you can do in a week.

Dinur: And one of the things that I remember at UC Riverside was from a department different from mine. I was in sociology, but I saw something that political science did, and I really liked it. And what they would do is they would have letters of rejection from professors and from graduate students who had submitted their work to journals or to conferences, and they didn't get accepted. They would post that on a department bulletin board. And then the next person who would get a rejection letter bought the previous person a coffee or a beer, and they would talk about it, because getting rejected wasn't seen as an absolute failure. It was, "Hey, you took a shot. It didn't go through this time. How are you going to improve that? What are you going to do so that, you know, this is going to be a little bit more polished for the next place you submit it to?" So -

Adam: - it was just a step on the road.

Dinur: Exactly. These rejections were viewed as just part of the game. And so you got rejected - and it's fairly common in academics to be told "no" - how are you going to deal with it? And having a social environment where these mistakes are rewarded, right? It's nice to go out with a friend or with a colleague for a beer, or for coffee, and to chat.

Dinur: And so, it showed them that these mistakes weren't the end of the world. And that's something that I'm trying to do now. And I try and be open with my students and I tell them, "Hey, I submitted this but I didn't get it accepted. It's part of the game and it sucks. It stings. But it's also not the end of the world. You see what feedback you got - some friendly, some not so much. You try and improve and you give your shot to the next journal or the next conference."

Adam: And students, you could use that particular method of, you know, maybe not posting your tests right on a bulletin board, but you could bring them to your study group and say, "Oh God, you know, I got a C-plus, I feel so bad," you know. And then someone else can say, "Well, I got a D-plus," you know, and you can get some perspective that way. But you can also, you know, go out for coffee or, if you're old enough, go out for some beers at the student union, and just sit there and go, 'Okay, so, anybody got an answer for why I didn't get number 47 on the exam correct? 'Cause I'm really - I don't get why I didn't get this,' and make it a learning process, instead of a beat-yourself-up process.

Dinur: This episode has been geared heavily towards students, because we're trying to break you out of these two harmful molds that you've grown up with. And so one of the things we want you to know is, look, you've written a paper, a term paper, you've had it proofread by people. So you feel like it's nice and polished, you turn it in... And you got a B. Or a B-plus. Or an A-minus. And now you're really, really, really upset, because how dare you get anything short of the mythical A+? You did all the right steps, right? You know, you even had it proofread. You did - you followed everything, you know, to a T.

Dinur: Well, we're hoping that you're able to see that A-minus or that B-plus or that B, and say, "Okay, I did pretty well on this. There's still room to room to improve or room to grow here."

Adam: And as someone who was raised perfectionist, I get it. I get it. That feeling of "I only got 97% Oh, that's a total failure!" That's really familiar to me, but it's not the truth. Most people would give their teeth for that A-minus or that B-plus or that B.

Adam: When I was in undergrad, the first class I took in undergrad, it was a world-systems course with Chris Chase-Dunn, and I wrote my paper, and I got it proofread, and I turned it in about three weeks before it was due. Well, it was the only paper he had. He had nothing to compare it to. And I got an A-minus on the first paper I turned in in undergrad. And I was crushed because it meant that I could not get a 4.0 at all. I was looking at that and going, "I'll never get a 4.0!"

Adam: Well, you know what? I got a 3.98. So big whoop, right?

Adam: I had another class where I turned in a paper, and the TA gave it back to me with a 99% and she had circled one place where there was a comma. She said, "This was the only mistake I could find, but I'm not allowed to give 100% so I had to find a mistake in your paper. So, I found a comma that didn't work for me."

Adam: And I'm like, "That's really stupid."

Adam: And she says, "I wouldn't recommend taking it to the professor, because they'll just laugh you out of their office." So I didn't, but I cringed because it was a 99%, not a 100. So, I get it. I totally get it. I understand that, that cringing feeling of "It's 97, it's not a perfect 100%!" I get it, but that's not actually a functional way to go through life, expecting yourself to be perfect and kicking yourself when you're down.

Adam: Now, we discussed in Episode 19 how to set a "good enough" grade goal and then a "stretch" goal, so do that, and work on adjusting your judgment of "good enough" from 100% to 93%, or even 83%. Because over time, if you do this consistently and say, "Okay, my 'good enough' goal for this exam is an 84%. As long as I get an 84%, anything above that is gravy" - over time, you're going to find that you relax a little bit about the imperfection of your "good enough" grade.

Dinur: And in Episode 48, Adam and I discussed that grades are a reflection of how you did on one assignment or test, at one point in time, and that your grades don't define you. Now, we have hundreds of students. There is no way we're going to keep track of how every student did on an assignment or on a test. You know, it tells us in that moment, "Okay, the student got a C on the test. Okay, they're reasonably good with this material, we're good to go." "Oh man, they bombed this test. What happened? Was it an issue with how they prepared? Was it just not their day?"

Dinur: And if they got an A, we don't go, "Oh my God, this is an amazing student." We go, "Okay, they did really, really well. We're good with this. Let's move on," because we want to see you grow, want to see you learn, but we don't associate your grades with you.

Dinur: Now what we will remember is how you talk to us. For me, for that student that I led off this episode with, when I first remember the complaints before I remember how excellent the work is - that is not a good sign. And the student needed a letter of recommendation. Full disclosure, I eventually did write the letter for them because, you know, their work had earned them the benefit of the doubt. But my first reaction was to remember the complaining. And I had to tell myself, "Okay, you don't want to put that in the letter." You know, I respect the dedication. I respect the drive, even if I think it's coming from a misguided place, but you don't want your professors to remember complaining. Because if that's what we remember, that doesn't give us a lot to give you the benefit of the doubt.

Adam: Now, if you made a mistake and, you know, or if I made a mistake, if there are points taken off for something, but you can show that the missing part's in the assignment, you know, we're having to correct those mistakes and adjust grades. I had a student this last semester who said, "Okay, so I did 10 of this assignment, but I only have, you know, a B-plus and I should have an A-minus." And I went back and looked, and sure enough, there was a mistake in my gradebook, where it wasn't calculating that particular row correctly. I'm like, "Oh, thank you. Here, let me fix this."

Adam: But when the claim is just, "I deserve a better grade," with nothing to back it up other than complaints? We really would like you to chill out and breathe. And really this grade-grubbing and perfectionism for me and Dinur is really missing the forest of the learning for the tree of the specific grade. And we understand if you were raised with self-esteem movement beliefs, and with helicopter parents, it's probable that you are a perfectionist, but being a perfectionist is not serving you.

Adam: Now, if the perfectionism is about things other than grades, remember you're human. Everybody makes mistakes every now and then and if you find yourself beating yourself up for feeling worthless or not measuring up to some social standard like, "Oh God, my car is not as nice as that guy's car" - first, it's okay to stop

beating yourself up, and second, if you can't seem to stop beating yourself up on your own, please, please seek out some help. Go to your campus counseling center or call one of the hotlines, the stress, you know, the crisis hotlines that we'll put in the show notes. There's no shame in saying "I need some help stopping this perfectionist stuff."

Adam: So you want to avoid being a grade-grubber. We want to avoid having to deal with you being a grade-grubber and complaining. So how do you do that? How do you avoid perfectionism? Well, as Dinur just mentioned, remember your grades aren't you, they're not who you are, they're just what you produced.

Adam: And remember also, like Dinur said, we have hundreds of students a term, assuming we remember any specific grade, if you haven't complained about it, is assuming a lot. If you don't complain about it, we probably won't remember it. It's only when you do complain about it that we remember it and we remember it negatively. So don't complain. You know, if it's, if it's an honest mistake, sure, come and correct it. But don't take it as a judgment of who you are. That's not how we see it. And you shouldn't see it that way either.

Dinur: And just as your assignment and your test is not who you are, we only grade what you submit. We see your finished product. We're not there 24/7, so we don't see your stress. We don't see the sleepless nights. We only see the paper you submitted or the test you turned in. Now if you say, "but I worked really hard" or "I tried really hard on this," well, if you want your effort to show and be clear to us, come to our office hours. Come talk to us. Get some advice, get some help, talk to us if you have questions about the class. Take your paper to the writing center. Make tutoring appointments. All of these are ways that you - are tangible ways, rather - that you show us effort. And hopefully, that also helps you learn. That helps you grow. And now, hopefully it helps your finished product be the best it can be.

Adam: A third thing - and this is tough, I won't pretend it's not - work on changing your focus from the result, which is the grade, to the process and learning more. So, learning how to learn, learning how to do this kind of assignment, learning how to ask that question, ask professors. That's what we're looking for. We're looking for growth and change. And we could speak much more about that in, say, a letter of recommendation, than just an arbitrary grade.

Adam: So, you got an A, if we saw no improvement and no learning and no process from you, then all we know is that you got an A. But if we know that you started out at a C, and you pulled yourself up to a B? Hey, we've got something we can talk about now.

Dinur: Now, let's say you get a paper back and you're not happy with the grade. Your first step is to look over the feedback that we've given, because it's much, much easier for us to work with students who can explain to where they feel a mistake was made. Like, we missed something that they wrote and we marked it off. Or maybe there was something that we thought wasn't explained very thoroughly. But if you just come to us and tell us, "Hey, I'm not happy with this grade," we're not going to do anything.

Dinur: And I remember I had a student a semester or two ago who came up to me - different than the student from earlier - and they really weren't happy with their term paper. I think they'd earned a B-minus on it.

Dinur: And they go, "I want to appeal this grade."

Dinur: I told them, "Okay, but you've got to - for me, you have to put it in writing. Where was the mistake made and what do you want me to look over?" And I said, "if you want me to do a complete regrade, your grade might stay the same. It might be lowered because I'm going to find mistakes that weren't docked earlier, or

your grade could go up. So you've got a one in three chance of your appeal going exactly the way you want it to.”

Dinur: That student didn't come back. They didn't tell me what they wanted to appeal or what I got wrong. They just weren't happy with the grade that they had earned, but they also came to me without looking at any of the feedback I had offered on the paper.

Adam: Think about it this way too. If you were us, if you were the professor and you had a student coming to you complaining about their grade, would you automatically just give them a better grade with no valid reason? And if you did that, is that fair to the people who did the assignment or did the test and met the standards the first time around? Because if it isn't, then this might help you realize why complaining about your grade without a reason, even though your perfectionism is driving that, it does not work, and it's not going to be received well by most professors. You've got to find a way to short-circuit your perfectionism in this case

Dinur: And you want to put your focus on how you can do better on the next test or assignment, rather than only focusing on stuff that's already been graded, you know. To borrow from sports, game one - your first game is over. It's in the books. You've got another game on the horizon. How are you going to improve from how you did in this one to the next one? Yeah. What do you need to do a little bit better? You're not going to go back and complain to the umpires if it's baseball or the referees in a different sport and say, “Well, we should have won this one, even though we lost.”

Dinur: Yeah, they're not going to take that seriously. But what you can do is say, “Okay, we may have lost this game, or I didn't play as well as I would've liked. What can I do a little bit better next time?” And again, just make that improvement your goal. Same deal with school. “I didn't do as great as I would have liked on this quiz or this test or this paper. How can I do a little bit better the next time around?”

Adam: And the last thing for students here, we know, we know that it may feel like an attack on your identity, on yourself, if you've always thought of yourself as an A student. So this feeling of being attacked is known as an existential crisis, and you've got to remind yourself that you are not your grade. You've got to remind yourself being perfect is not possible. It's an unobtainable goal.

Adam: And you really have to remember, grades are not a judgment of you. They are only a judgment of the work you turned in, and it's okay to make mistakes. And I know for someone who's a perfectionist, a lot of that sounds like, “Oh my God, you're sinning, that's wrong.” It feels like you're being told to sin, after being told what being a good person is. But I promise you it's not possible to be perfect. Grades are not a judgment of you personally, and you've got to get past this view that the only way that you can be acceptable is to be perfect, because then you'll never be acceptable, and that's not fair to you.

Dinur: Oh, for listeners who are more religious, perfection is God's domain. None of us are God.

Dinur: Now, the way teachers can use this is work with your students. Challenge their views of mistakes. If they get really uptight, if they're cringing, talk to them. Make them spell it out. And I know that that sounds extraordinarily mean to students, because we're asking you to go against what you've been raised with. But for teachers, especially in classes that are science-based, you can tell students something like, “Oh, so you found out that this idea or this hypothesis or this theory or this method didn't work in your case. Has anything bad happened?”

Adam: And they're going to say "Yes!" They're going to say, "Yes, it's, it's bad!" And then ask them "Why is it bad?"

Dinur: Mm-hmm.

Adam: And what they're probably going to say is something like "Because it means I'm wrong!"

Dinur: Being wrong is how science works. We have these ideas, we test them out and when we verify them, we say that, "Oh yeah, this idea works. Okay, cool. How do we grow on this? How do we expand it?" And if it doesn't work, we go, "Okay, why didn't it work? What's special about this here that it didn't work or what special? In the cases where it does work, now we can start exploring even more and more." And that is science. We're building ideas on top of ideas.

Adam: And even in the humanities - humanities is about interpretation, and interpretation is one of those things where you may have a very different interpretation, but that doesn't mean it's wrong. It just means it's different. And some perfectionist students (and perfectionist teachers and perfectionist folks) feel that being different is wrong too, and that's a whole 'nother area that we might need to do a different episode about.

Adam: Now the second thing is, teachers, you've got to make mistake-making acceptable. You've got to give examples of famous people who made mistakes. So, here's a few examples that I throw at my students.

Adam: The Bay of Pigs invasion, that was terribly mismanaged. It was a terribly mismanaged military move. There were lots of yes-men when they were planning it out, and nobody paid attention to the real problems, because they didn't want to be the bad guy who said, "Hey, this isn't going to work."

Adam: The Challenger explosion, when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded in the 1980s, people tried to raise the alarm, and other people ignored the people who were raising the alarm, because they didn't want to look like they were stupid. And so they sent a shuttle into space, and seven people died.

Adam: In a little bit less fraught area, Herman Melville, when he wrote Moby Dick, he had all of this buildup for the first, like, three or four chapters - humanities folks, I'm talking to you specifically - about this dude named Bulkington. He really liked Bulkington. He was talking all about Bulkington and then suddenly he discovered a different character named Ahab, and Bulkington got washed off the boat and dies! And Melville was not a tidy writer, and he never went back and revised Bulkington out of the beginning of his book. So if you read Moby Dick, pay attention to Bulkington, cause he's only there for about three chapters.

Adam: In social science, there's a dude named Ekman - Paul Ekman, and he did a bunch of work on facial expressions. He gave people - "here's a bunch of pictures of people with facial expressions." His goal was to show that facial expressions have the same meaning, no matter what culture you were in. And what he did was he said, "Okay, I want you to sort these into these six labels, you know, into angry or sad or upset." And when he gave them labels, they could sort by the labels. But that was pre-priming the respondents, which is a no-no. And he also did earlier tests, where he didn't give them labels, and the sorting didn't fall out the way that he thought it would. So he started priming them. But priming them is a methodological design mistake.

Adam: In my own dissertation - and I tell my students, "Hi, I've made big mistakes. I didn't find this mistake until halfway through my dissertation" - I had assumed during a couple of early tests in my dissertation data that people wouldn't care about strangers' opinions. And then it turned out that people do care about strangers' opinions. So I had to modify my design to account for that. And I make a point of telling my students about this.

Adam: If you make mistake-making acceptable, if you make it necessary, if you tell your students, “if you get through my class without making any mistakes, you didn't learn anything” - that may help change their mindset on mistake-making and on perfectionism and help them adjust to the way the world really works.

Dinur: And I know for me and my dissertation, yeah, I thought that I would see differences in how student athletes of color were treated compared to their white counterparts. And I thought that there might be a gender difference where the male athletes are told, “No, you're going to go pro, you want to focus on your sport,” and women athletes would be told the opposite, like, “There's not as much of a chance for you. You want to focus on your grades.” And I didn't find evidence of either of that. And so I had to say, “Well, look, we know that there are issues with racism in college sports, but in these almost 40 interviews I did, it didn't come up. So maybe it's something that's special about these schools, or where they're located, or the NCAA division that they're in.” But you have to be open and you have to say, “Hey, I thought this would be the case, but I didn't find support for it. But instead, here's what I did find.” Okay, I made that mistake and they still let me pass the dissertation. So you can see making mistakes is just, it's part of the game. It's part of the process.

Adam: Heck, you could even mention Edison. He is not - he has not failed a hundred times. He has successfully found a hundred ways that didn't work. He said that about the light bulb. No, a thousand times. He said that about the light bulb, and there were people saying, “No, you failed!” And he's like, “yeah, but I learned something every time.”

Dinur: Now, if you're a teacher, you want to have a rubric developed ahead of time. So for me, for my term papers, I let my students see what each part of their paper is worth. So “I'm looking for this in the thesis statement, and it's worth X amount of points.” “I'm looking for you to discuss at least these many examples here, and I can award you up to this many points per examples.” And you want to give feedback. When students turn their paper in, what did they do well? What needs improvement? What wowed you? And what would you say, “Okay, here's what you're doing kind of well, but here's where you've got to improve a little bit. You've got to step up your thesis over here. But I really like the examples that you're giving.” And in Episode 42 Adam and I discuss how to make rubrics.

Adam: Now, some professors, including me, allow for several redos up until a certain grade is reached - so, C or better for passing. So if that's feasible, let your students know that that's how you're going to grade. And this is how I do it. I have standards-based reading. So I say, “All right, on quizzes, they only count if you got at least a 70% but once you hit 70%, it doesn't matter whether it's 70, 71, 85, or 92 - you passed, move on, okay?”

Adam: And for some students, they've come to me after getting, you know, a 92 on their first quiz. And they're like, “I need to retake this so that I can get 100%.”

Adam: I'm all, “No, you don't. You're wasting your time. You've already passed it.”

Adam: “Yeah, but, but it's not 100%!”

Adam: “No, it's not. That's okay. Move on.” And they have to adjust to the idea that 92 is good enough.

Adam: Another thing that you might want to talk about with your students is why they feel like if they don't get 95% - or 100% rather - why is it necessary to get 100% when the standard is 70? And get them to talk about it. Because sometimes students will be able to figure out, by talking about how necessary it is to get 100% for them, why it's necessary. And maybe they'll be able to look at that and say, “You know, that's kinda kooky.”

That's actually not as important as I thought it was - but it just frightens me." And then you can refer them to the counseling center to deal with their anxiety.

Dinur: Now, if that's not feasible for you, let your students know that they can come for help up until a certain point. So I enforce, it's either a 48-hour or a 72-hour rule, meaning once it's 48 or 72 hours before, say, the term paper's due, I will not look over the entire assignment, but I will answer specific questions. And I've had students ask me, "can you look over this draft and tell me what I would have earned as a grade?" No, I'm about to read your final paper, in, like, two days. So no, but if you have a specific part you're curious about, you know, did I explain this idea? well, okay, is my thesis okay? that I'm willing to look over and to give some feedback. But for me, like if you're waiting up until that last moment to ask me for help, then to me that comes off as panicking. You know? Instead come to me weeks in advance, come to my office hours or email me and then let's meet. Let's talk about it.

Adam: And students, we can't fix your panic. I'm sorry. That is not something that's in either of our skillsets.

Adam: So teachers, one thing that you can do to help students clarify why they need the grade change beyond "if it's not 100% then I feel like a failure," which is a different issue. Make them put their grade appeals in writing and point out specifically where they feel a mistake was made, like "you didn't see that my thesis was following the guidelines" or why their assignments should be regraded, like, "I don't agree with your grading on my essays because of this and this and this" in this exam. If they have to articulate why they need it regraded it may bring up that they're frightened of not being perfect. It may bring it up, and then they might have to talk with you about it.

Adam: Students, if you have to write a grade appeal, figure out, is it actually only "because I'm a perfectionist and I'm scared of getting anything less than a perfect grade?" Because that's not something that we can fix, but it is something that you can fix.

Dinur: Now remember, also, you have three options when you receive a grade appeal, okay? One, the grade on the assignment or task could stay the same, like, "Hey, this was a B-plus level paper and I don't see how it's changing up. I don't see how it's changing down."

Dinur: Two, and this is the one that students really won't like, is maybe that grade gets lowered, right? Maybe we say, "Hey, you earned a B-plus, but really we could ding you down to a B because we missed some mistakes the first time around" or "We were feeling generous. We noticed the mistakes, but we liked the paper so much that we thought it was worth that extra grade step, but now that you're making me redo this effort, you're not giving me a reason that you want the grade to change other than you didn't like it. Well, maybe I'm going to be a little less generous the second time around."

Dinur: Now the ideal one for students is the grade goes up, but that means that there's a two in three chance that the grade on the paper is not going to go up. And so, for students, put into words where do you think the mistake was made, so that we can tell, and say, "Oh yeah, you did write this thesis. I don't know why I missed it. Let me add some points back quickly," but also know that if you're just complaining, you know, and it comes off to us as for the sake of complaining, you didn't like the grade. We're not going to be especially sympathetic.

Dinur: And we feel bad because we know that you know, this is the product of being raised with the problems of perfectionism, but we're grading the assignment, we're grading that, we're not creating who you are. We're just grading your performance on this specific thing, and if you think we made a mistake, show us where we made a mistake on this specific thing.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 49! If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 50, when we'll interview Professor Larry Rosen on his work on distraction, what causes it and how to handle it.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!