



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

Episode 50 - Handling Curveballs and Rolling With the Punches

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

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

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

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 50: How to roll with the punches in school and in life.

So, every 10th episode Adam and I want to interview other educators and, potentially, students, to get at their experiences, their expertise and get their advice for other people. And that said, that means doing a job that I really, really hate: Trying to figure out matching days and times when schedules click.

Now, for those of you who are listening and are taking the LSAT, or are thinking about the LSAT for law school, figuring out things based on scheduling - such as figuring out days and times, or places to sit around a table or in a room - are some of the logic games you get to face on that test. But there's a reason I'm not in law school!

Adam: And there's a reason I'm not either. Sometimes life intervenes, and it just does not go according to our plans. It throws us a curveball. It's a really annoying inconvenience. And that's what happened this time. We were not able to line up our schedules with Professor Rosen's so that he could be our guest today. So we'll see him later this spring, for sure. But right now it's not happening.

Dinur: So, given that we weren't able to match up our schedules, Adam and I decided to turn our lemons into lemon drop shots - uh, sorry, "lemonade!" Yeah, "lemonade" for the under-21 or under-18, depending on what country you're in - and write this episode. And this episode is all about rolling with the punches. It's all about adapting to difficult situations in school and in life.

So what do we do when life throws us some curveballs? Well, this episode is all about the ideas of resilience and perseverance.

Adam: So, there are five main points that we found in our research. And the first one is: you've got to keep an open mind, and you've got to understand that changes will happen, so don't take it personally. There's no point in taking it personally.

Dinur: Right. And some of you may have heard the phrase that “the only constant in life is change.” And unfortunately, that’s true. We may love our routines, but inevitably, at some point, we have to deal with that change that we didn’t plan for. And a lot of the time, this has nothing to do with what we need to get done. It has a lot more to do with an outside event, such as a breakup or getting sick or a family emergency, right? Stuff that’s beyond people’s control, in a sense. Maybe we had certain expectations, we thought we were going to nail an exam, we thought we had aced a paper, and we get some really, really negative feedback or a really low score. The teacher is just mean and rips you individually, or rips the class as a whole, and now, you don’t know what to do. Your confidence is shot.

Adam: Now, when this happens, the first thing we’ve got to remember is, change? Change happens. And it’s very rarely deliberate or on purpose. No matter how bad it feels, it’s probably not aimed at us. I’ll give an example.

Just last week, I had a student who seemed to be doing really well in my class. They came to office hours. They asked for explanations of parts of the syllabus they weren’t sure about. I thought they were going to do great in the class. And then, I got a notification from the registrar that they dropped the class.

Now, we’re near the end of add-drop, and I don’t know why they dropped the class, but at first I took it personally. I’m all, “you show up to my office hours, you make me think you’re interested, and then suddenly you disappear? Excuse me?” But I had to realize - and after about five minutes I did realize - it doesn’t matter why they did. It’s very likely not personal. They just decided they needed to drop the class. It’s not necessarily about me. It may not even be about the class. Maybe they had a job that conflicted with the course time. Maybe they had to reduce their units because they were overwhelmed. Whatever it was, it probably wasn’t personal, and it probably wasn’t aimed at me. So I can either take it personally and sulk about it and be angry about it, or I can say, “Okay, that was his choice,” and let it go.

Dinur: And the second tip that we have is, you want to get some perspective on the change.

Adam: And when we talk about perspective, there are several ways to get perspective on a change. So first, ask yourself, is anybody dead? Is anyone at risk of dying? Okay, the answer to that will almost always be “no.” A bad test score does not mean you’re dying. It does not mean you’re dead. And if nobody’s dying or dead, this isn’t as bad as it feels, even if it feels bad.

Now, I’m not trying to make you feel like, “well, my mom’s in the hospital...” Well, then, that’s pretty scary. I understand that. But if it’s about a score on an exam, that’s not the same thing as being threatened by a tiger. Even though your brain will interpret it that way, that doesn’t mean that’s what’s going on. So ask yourself, “is anyone dead? Is anyone at risk of dying?” And if not, okay, it may feel bad, but it’s not as bad as it feels.

Now, the second way to take perspective is ask yourself this: the Five Rule. Will this matter five minutes from now? Okay, maybe it does. But will it still matter five hours from now? Okay, maybe then, yeah...

Five days from now? Five weeks from now?

Notice the farther away you get - five months, five years - it begins to not matter. At some point it’s like, “five years from now, I’m really not going to care that it got a 47% on this calculus test. it might be a funny story for me to tell in five years, but it’s not going to matter anymore.” So if it doesn’t matter in five years or even in five weeks, it’s not that big of a deal, is it? It is something you can get past. It is something that you can get over.

Dinur: And the reason you want to take or gain some perspective on a situation, it's really to show yourself, "Hey, I can handle this. This sucks, but it's not as bad as I thought." And look, part of getting perspective on a situation is acknowledging that it sucks, but acknowledging that it's not as bad as we might initially think it is.

Adam: Now the third tip we've got for you is, ask productive questions, not information questions. So productive questions are things like, "How can I do better next time? What should I do to solve this problem or work towards a solution?" These are action questions. They give you control over the situation. It's what you can do.

Information questions, on the other hand are things like "why did this happen to me?" Okay, we all grapple with that question from time to time, but this framework kind of makes you feel powerless, and that feeling can lead to one bit of bad news or one curveball snowballing, and getting completely out of control in ways that you don't want it to.

So although, yes, you're allowed to wallow for a couple of minutes, "why did this happen to me?" Don't make that the main question. Once you're done with asking, "why did this happen to me," say "how can I do it differently next time?"

Dinur: Right. And honestly I would piggyback and just say, "don't add those last two words." You can say, "why did this happen? Why was this a low score?" Because that can lead you to that next step and saying, "okay, if this score isn't what I wanted it to be, what can I do to change it for next time?"

Adam: You know, that's interesting, 'cause that's how I take it with coaching. It's - the coaching is "let's identify what's in your way, figure out why it happened, and then fix it." So if I know, for example, that I've got a student who is generally not doing well on multiple-choice exams, I might ask them, "okay, how do you study for them?"

And then if I find out all they do is read and reread the book, "Okay, we've got to address the way you study. Because the way you study is not helping you remember this stuff."

And if I find out that they do use flashcards and they're still blanking, "Okay, we might want to talk to a counselor about anxiety, and see if we can do something about that." Right? But identifying the problem, "why did this happen?" Perfectly acceptable, productive question. But like Dinur just pointed out: "Why did this happen to me?" That's wallowing. That's just trying to find something to blame, and blaming doesn't get you anywhere.

Dinur: So our fourth tip is you want to ask for and accept advice and help. And that can be tough! It's tough to ask someone and say, "I need help with something." But advice can help us identify what we can do. Help can make it easier to do that. So you want to reach out to your friends, reach out to your teachers, your family members, and you want to ask them, "I'm in this situation. Have you ever been in a situation like this?" If they say, "yeah," ask them what did they do? "Can you help me get through it? Do you know someone who's gone through something similar who might be able to help me?" Because odds are you're probably not the first person in the history of the world to get a bad test or a bad paper. You're also not the first person to ever deal with an overloaded class schedule or conflicting work and class schedules. Talk to people who've been through the struggles before and see what advice and perspective they've gained, that they can help you.

Adam: For me, one of my things that's hard to ask for help about is stuff involving things that I don't know much about. Like with cars, for example. I know nothing about cars, except where you put the gas and how to drive them. When anything goes wrong with the car, I am completely at a loss. So what I've done is, I've built up a couple of trusted people that I know I can go to them and I can ask them questions about cars, and if they can't tell me what's wrong, they'll be able to tell me who to talk to. For example, when the transmission in my old SUV broke down after like 150,000 miles, suddenly the transmission decided it wasn't going to work anymore. And I went to my two "car friends," as I think of them, and I said, "Do you know anyone in my area who can fix a transmission and do you have any idea how much it'll cost?"

And they said, "Oh yeah, when my transmission busted, I went to Joe so-and-so." And they sent me to Joe so-and-so and Joe so-and-so, who was a knowledgeable mechanic, said, "I don't work on this kind of car, but I know who does. Go talk to Stu, and Stu will help you." So I went to Stu. Stu gave me an estimate, and then I called my bank and I said, "Okay, so that car that I'm still paying for? The transmission died, and I have to pay -" it was about \$3,500. It was not cheap - "can you help me?" And they said, "sure, we want to keep you in a car that runs."

Most of the time when you ask somebody for help, they will probably have some help for you - and they will be happy that you asked them for help. My bank, my credit union, actually, when I called them with this problem, I was terrified. I'm like, "I have no idea what I'm going to do." They're all, "we're going to give you a loan to pay that car repair. You'll be fine." And they were so kind to me and they were saying, "don't worry about it. You'll be fine."

Dinur: I've had students who will come to me really upset because they didn't do so well on a first exam. And I go, "okay, so what happened?"

They go, "well, I can't get an A now, can I?"

And I told them, one, "That's not entirely true. I've had students who bombed a test and do really, really well. They get somewhere in the A range."

But I also asked them, "Okay, so I know you're concerned about the grade, but is there something more going on here?" And often they're feeling a lot of stress. They're feeling pressure. Item one is students are socialized into thinking that anything less than an A is an F and that's bad, bad approach to give students. We've talked in previous episodes about what grades actually mean once you're at the college level. But we also say, okay, some of them feel pressured, they want to go to professional school. And I tell them, "Look, I don't just look at the strict percentage on a test. If I see improvement throughout the term, that gives me something that I can say, 'okay, this student is really, like, learning this material better. They're really becoming a better student.' And if you're borderline, I'm willing to bump you up a little bit." So a bad test doesn't mean it's the end of the world, but it also means that they have to come and say, "Okay, I need help. What went wrong here?"

Adam: And the thing is, if you don't ask for help, you can't get that kind of help. You have to ask for help in order to get it. And a lot of people that you may not realize have good advice are more than willing to help you. So look at everybody that you know. What do they know that you don't? Can they help you with this thing?

Now the last tip, the fifth tip, is focus on what you can do. So once you've asked productive questions, you'll get a better handle on what you can actually do now. Did you get bad feedback on a paper? Well, find out first - can you revise it? Can you redo it and turn it in? And if you can't, then make notes on the feedback and check future papers for the problems that the feedback talks about. You might not be able to use it for this specific

curveball, but you can prevent curveballs later by addressing these problems and stuff that you're doing that's similar to the thing that threw you the curveball in the first place.

On the other hand, is the curveball a family emergency? Make sure your professors know what's happening. You know, let us know. Send us an email saying, "my dad's in the hospital and I really, I'm going to be missing class for a few days," and then arrange for makeup exams or extensions on other work and so on, and then go do what you can do for your family. If you're having an illness, did you go through a breakup? Same thing, but now make arrangements for makeup exams, make arrangements for extensions and then take care of yourself. If you're sick, go to bed or go to the doctor. If you're dealing with a breakup, maybe you just need a couple of days to cry it out, write it out, think angry things, whatever you need to do so that you can get back to your functional state. Totally fine. All right?

You need to do what you can do, but notice the word "can." Don't focus on doing what you wish you could do. 'Cause all that's going to do is send you down into a spiral of, "I can't do anything about this."

There are some things you can't do. You can't make them date you again. If you're broken up, you're going to have to let it go. If your father's in the hospital, you're going to have to accept that might mean that he will die. You have to get ready for that, if he's in that kind of situation. Like, the last time my dad went into the hospital and they told us, you know, "he has about six weeks to live." That was not optional. I couldn't wish that away. I wanted to, but I had to then look at, "okay, well, knowing that dad is going to die, what should I do? What can I do? How can I help him? How can I handle the fact that my students will not see me?"

Focus on what you can do, instead of what you wish could happen.

Now, as we've been doing for the last few episodes and as we plan to do for the rest of the episodes that we ever create, we're going to now talk about our experience with this and how we handled it when life threw us curveballs, and then we'll talk about how students and teachers can use it. So, Dinur gets the first shot at this.

Dinur: All right. So my first experience that I want to talk about with you all, it happened during my dissertation, and it's actually still going on today, because I'm extending that research. And for that I'm talking to student athletes, because I really want to understand kind of the academic pressures and the obstacles that they faced to doing well in their classes.

And so I wanted to interview - when I say "high school profile," I mean schools that have major athletics programs where they're on TV, and they're bringing in a lot of money. Out here in Southern California that's schools like USC and UCLA in the LA area. In schools like in the South? Georgia or LSU or Texas. For the listeners in the US, you're recognizing some of these schools from their sports teams. So I wanted to talk to athletes, I wanted to talk to coaches, and I wanted to talk to academic advisors.

So I started trying to email people at different schools, and I was getting absolutely no response. Which, I mean, makes sense. If you're an athlete at UCLA and you get an email from someone you've never met at either UC Riverside or at Cal State LA, depending on which email address I was using, why would you assume that research is legit? And if you're a coach here, they don't know who I am.

And so I had to figure out what do I do? Because I can't just go to my committee and say I wanted to interview football players and no one was willing to, so I guess I'm not doing research now. But that's not going to work.

What I started to do is I said, "Okay, I can talk to the athletes at the schools I teach at, because some of them might have either been on my classes, or I've got rapport with them because one of their teammates has taken me before." And for coaches and for advisors, the fact that I've got that shared school email, that same "dot-edu" that they have, they can check me out pretty quickly and say, "Oh yeah, this person is at our school. This is what they're doing." And so that gives me that sense of legitimacy. So it's a way of working around. The people I interviewed weren't who I thought I was going to interview at first, but at least by talking to them, I was able to get some perspective, and that's led me to trying to grow on this project.

Adam: Now for me, back in November - we're recording this in the end of January in 2020 - but back in November, I was hospitalized. I had to miss four days of school, because I developed a heart condition, and it was kind of scary. And it was a huge curveball, of course it was - but the thing is, I was better equipped to handle it because about four years before that, I had had about a two-week illness. I caught the flu and I was out sick for about two weeks, right at the beginning of the semester. We're talking, like, end of week one, beginning of week two, all of week three - and I did not handle that especially well.

I tried to get the students to make up all the work that I had missed lecturing, 'cause I was still doing in-class lectures at the time. And it just, it overloaded them. A lot of the students dropped out because they couldn't stand it. They transferred to other classes. And so at that time, I asked myself some questions like, "okay, what could I have done differently? What can I do differently in the future?" And over the next two, three years I developed my system where they get the lectures online, where it doesn't depend on me being there for them to be able to get the information they need.

So, when I was hospitalized this past November, it actually worked out really well, because I had set up these systems, and it made me being in the hospital far less bad. I had a way to text my students to let them know, "Okay, make sure you still watch these. We're not going to go over them in class. I'm going to give everybody credit for being in class those two days" - because I wasn't there cause I missed two days in all of my classes - "and send me an email if you have questions. I will hopefully be back on Monday. If I'm not, I will send out another text and let you all know." And because I had all these systems set up, based on what had happened to me four years before, when I'd had to miss classes, it made it much less bad for me and for my students.

Dinur: And another example - or a time that I struggled and I had to work around a curveball - was when I was in graduate school and I had the class from Hell. I was taking this class, and all of us got ripped by the professor for how we did on a test. And the professor's just pretty mean, ripped us, said we were the worst students they had had in like 20 or 30 years. They tried to give us an extra day to write an exam. They thought that we would be able to write, somehow, I think 30 pages in three hours. And that's not happening.

Adam: No, that's completely not happening.

Dinur: And what happened after that was, we all submitted the test. The professor goes, "Well, I'm really not happy with this. So now I'm going to assign a weekly assignment due every Sunday at noon." And that wasn't put on the original syllabus. And that was too much of a time constraint for me. I couldn't deal with that on top of my other coursework and on top of my teaching. And I had to withdraw from that class and I told them, "Hey, this class and I are not a good fit."

I was able to find something else to replace it. I ended up working in a research group, and that led me to talking to people who are doing very different research from what I'm doing, but that also meant that I was being exposed to new ideas, new methods - and I felt like I was really learning something from it. And so on

the one hand, it stunk withdrawing from the class. It wasn't my favorite thing to do. But I also was really glad in the end, because I was really grateful for the experience that I got from joining that research group.

Adam: Then for me, another place where I struggled was as a student - my defense of my dissertation, which is how they say, "All right, you've got the PhD now." I had intended to defend in June before I walked - before I went to graduation and got my hood and everything. And it had to be put off until July, because one of my committee members had a family emergency in Europe, and they had to fly back to Europe in the two weeks when I would have had my dissertation defense. And the thing is - at the time at least, I don't know if they've changed their standards since then - but at the time, my graduate school demanded that everyone in the committee be in person at the defense. They couldn't be coming in by the phone, they couldn't be there on Skype, they couldn't be there on Zoom. They had to be literally in the room with the person defending. And because that committee member couldn't be there, I had to put off my dissertation defense until July. And that really hurt in some ways, 'cause it was like I walked for my PhD, I get hooded, and inside, I'm feeling like a fraud because I haven't defended.

But that allowed me to take an extra month to make damn sure that I had everything lined up, all my ducks in a row, everything ready to go, so that my dissertation defense would go off without a hitch. And that is in fact exactly what happened. I walked in on the day of my dissertation, I defended for 45 minutes, I took questions for about 30 minutes, and then two of my committee members said, you know, "I've got to go. I've got a class," or "I've got to go 'cause I've got to go to the doctor." And the other two committee members said, "Oh yeah. And they said they didn't have any corrections for you, so just submit the damn thing."

So I had no revisions, which was very unusual. I happen to think that having that extra month allowed me to make damn sure that I wouldn't need revisions. So it turned out better. But at the time, it just felt like "they did this on purpose to make sure that I would not have defended before I walked." And now looking back on it, you know, that "will this matter in five years?" I have no idea why it mattered to me as much as it did, but it doesn't matter now.

Dinur: So the way we want or we suggest students use our advice is one, start with perspective. Are you dying? And I don't mean this in the philosophical, "Oh, we're all dying out at some rate." Are you dying from this curveball? If you're not, it's probably not as bad as you think. Is someone else dying because you didn't do well on a test? Also, probably not. So it's not as bad as you feel in the moment.

Also take a step back and take the long view, a bad test, a bad paper, a curveball is one point in time, it's not something that lasts forever. And I know that that's really something hard to accept because when you're a student, everything feels like it's really, really important. As people, we think that whatever happened to us now is the most important thing to happen because of recency bias. It's the freshest thing that we can think of. And so we think it's the most important.

And also, ask productive questions. Things like, "How can I do better next time? What can I change?"

Make sure to ask for help because it's really, really - we promise! - it's really okay to ask for help.

Adam: And I can tell you, for me, that's one of my biggest frustrations as a teacher is when students come to me in week 14 and ask for help. I'm like, "I wish you'd come earlier," and they said, "Yeah, but I feel bad about asking for help or I shouldn't have to ask for help. I should be able to do it all on my own."

Who said that? Where is it written that you have to be able to do everything all on your own with no help? That's not the way the world works, even though you've been told it is.

Now, teachers, here's how you can use this. First, model it for your students when you get curveballs, which is what I had to do when I got sick and went into the hospital last November. I told the students, "Okay, this is how we're going to handle it."

It was a curveball, yes. I wasn't there for four days, yes. But I let them know "Here's how we're going to handle it. This is a curveball. I'm in the hospital, I hope to be back on Monday. Don't worry, I'm not dying. I'll be okay and don't worry. You'll get your grades in, you know, on time. I'll take care of all of that." So I basically said "This is how I'm going to take care of it on my side. Please make sure you take care of it on your side." I had students come up to me two, three weeks later saying, "I was so worried about you 'cause I didn't know what we were going to do about the class, I didn't know if you were okay, and getting your email saying this is what we're going to do and this is how we're going to do it, that helped so much."

And two other things, teachers: we tend to plan our classes pretty tightly, most of us. So we've got to be flexible and we've got to be compassionate. When your students come to you about family emergencies, about work emergencies, about other things they don't actually have control over, be flexible. Allow them an extra few days. Allow them to retake that exam that they missed or that they can't make it to. Basically, what I tell my students is: "If it is something you had no control over, I will find a way to work with you on it." And that includes if their boss tells them, "If you don't come into work today, I'm going to fire you." They need their job as much as, if not more, than they need this class.

And the compassionate thing? When you're being flexible, be nice about it. When they come to you about feedback that they didn't expect, help them deal with their feelings first. Then, after they've dealt with their feelings and they're feeling a little better, then talk about what they need to improve. Don't just start out by saying, "Well, you need to fix this and this and this and this and this." That tells them, "all I see you as is a person who is -"

Dinur: A list of mistakes.

Adam: Yeah - "a person who's a list of mistakes, a person I'm stuffing information into. That's all you're good for."

Remember that students are people first, and they need your compassion first. Because, especially for the students who have been drilled into believing that only an A is a passing grade, their first C, to them, is a total catastrophe. It may not feel that way to you, but that's how it feels to them.

Dinur: And that's why Adam and I say that we don't teach classes. We're teaching people, right? Well, you've got to remember that we are in a people-centered environment, and that means people have feelings. They're going to be upset. We've got to understand that, and accept it, and also help them improve.

So that compassion and that flexibility I think really, really go a long way. Understand that just as we're people, - and I know students are probably surprised hearing that, but we are - our students are people too, and it helps everyone if that's kind of remembered and brought to the forefront.

So that's what we have for you for Episode 50. 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 would really appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 51. That's when we'll talk with teachers about different ways to assess student work that don't involve grades.

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

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!