



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

Episode 51: Ways to Assess That Aren't Grades

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

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

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

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 51: Different ways to assess that don't include grades.

Adam: Now, this is a teacher-focused episode and so it's really mostly for professors, mostly for teachers. Granted, if you are a student and you want to know about how we might find new ways to assess you, that's great, but this is mostly for the teachers. And teachers, too many times, too many of us are defaulting to the A - F letter grade scheme, or a 10-point percentage breakdown, and we don't really realize there are other ways to assess and grade our students' work.

Adam: And so, in this episode, we're going to talk about some of those ways to grade that don't involve grades, and we're going to have a lot of links for you in the show notes. We've got multiple articles on different sites like TeachThought and Edutopia, and we're going to be referring to them throughout this episode.

Dinur: Now, we did some research for this episode, and found some really interesting history about grading - stuff that I know that I didn't know prior to this. Part of it is that during the 2010s - so, the last decade, both public and private, K - 12 schools around the United States began going from grades as measures of skills and competency to looking at other measures. So, things like credit hours, the A - F system, and even GPAs, were deemphasized in favor of qualitative reviews of student work.

Dinur: So why is this going on? Well, the A - F scale, or the 10% breakdown, was actually formed during the Industrial Revolution. The goals of school during that time weren't to create PhDs or even get people through a bachelor's degree. Schools were there to create factory workers who had basic competency in reading, writing, arithmetic, and following directions. And if you think back to elementary school, when you had to be at your desk by the time the bell rang, they're getting you ready to follow directions and listen for the bell or listen for the whistle.

Dinur: Well, the A - F grading scale fit really well with the needs of employers at the time. They needed a workforce who could do math, who could read, who could write, who would follow their directions, and this grading system gave them a quick way to summarize and rank employee skill sets compared to other employees.

Adam: But the thing is that what we found, too, in the research is that nowadays, high school is no longer enough. It used to be: all right, high school used to be - you finished high school and you went into the trades. You know, you started working as a plumber, or you started working in a factory, or you started working for your parents' business. But to qualify for most jobs in the modern workplace, high school grads have to get a college degree, because high school is just no longer enough.

Adam: And the skill sets that employers want now, like persistence, teamwork, problem solving, creativity, social skills - so they get along with their coworkers - and resilience? You really can't express those with the A - F system. I mean, what would it mean to have an A in creativity, or a C in persistence, or an F in social skills? You know, what does that mean? It's not meaningful anymore.

Adam: So Scott Looney, who runs the Hawkins School in Cleveland, and he's in one of the links that we'll put in the show notes. He had this to say about the A - F grading system in an article on edutopia.org, and I'll quote this: "The grading system right now is demoralizing and it's designed to produce winners and losers. But the purpose of education is not to sort kids, it's to grow kids. Teachers need to coach and mentor. But with grades, teachers turn into judges. I think we can show the unique abilities of kids without stratifying them."

And that's unquote. Now, I think this is interesting because we tend to still think of grading our students and ranking them and stratifying them, and is that serving them? It may be serving the needs of the institution that needs a quick way to say, "look, you know, here's the average GPA of all our students," but what does that mean? More and more we're finding these quantitative measures, these numerical measures, don't actually tell us very much.

Dinur: And it's also come to light that many of the ranking metrics used by schools and until recently, employers, well, they're also problematic. The standardized tests, things like the SAT and the ACT? Well, they've been shown to measure one real skill and that skill is "how to take standardized tests." There's a reason that the kids that pay more to get prep for these tests end up doing better, and that's because they're taught how to take the tests and the tricks that those tests are teaching.

Adam: When I ask my incoming freshmen, what do they teach you how to do in high school? I've had students every semester say "They taught us how to fill in bubbles. They taught us how to fill in bubbles really, really well." If that's the only skill, how does that translate to college? How does that translate to the workforce?

Dinur: Right. And I know that both Adam and I had to take the GRE to get into graduate school and that's like the SAT on steroids. So, there's reading comprehension, there's math, there's a writing section. I promise you, kind of like the SAT, you're going to study a bunch of vocabulary, and you're not going to use most of it even when you go through graduate school.

So this test? It's a nice score for a school to have and to brag about. But these tests don't really prepare you for the education that you're about to receive, and they're not predictive of college success. They're not predictive of any other kind of success. And culturally, these tests are slanted towards white middle-class life experiences or upper-class life experiences. And that means that students of color and non-middle-class

students are left out. They're left behind in these tests, and the inequality and inequity are both increased by continuing to use these tests as metrics for higher education.

And we also know that if students are told they're going to be graded, then their attention goes from learning to the grade. And you might say, well, what's the difference? Well, if you're learning? You're focusing on the material or on the skill. If you're focusing on the grade, you're willing to forego that kind of holistic component to growing, and you're focusing only on the grade. So instead of getting the point of an assignment - what a student's supposed to absorb from the material - they focus on getting points from the assignment.

Now, Dan Pink's book *Drive* goes into detail about this in terms of money, but the effect is no different when the "salary" comes in the form of a letter grade or a percent. It has the same attention-shifting effect on the students' ability to pay attention to the work. So they're focusing on the wrong thing.

So what should we do instead?

Adam: So, there are three main issues that Dinur and I are going to talk about in the next few minutes, and one of them is are we grading formatively or summatively? And then we'll ask how we meaningfully assess, and finally, how do we meaningfully report student progress.

Adam: Now you might notice the word "meaning" and "meaningful." It's becoming more and more important, because the skills that students need can no longer be measured on an A - F scale. The skills that employers are demanding are no longer measured on an A - F scale.

Adam: And so, there are these three main issues. The first one that I'm going to go over now is "formative or summative?" Which kind of assessment, which kind of grading are we doing? Now, when I first ran into this, probably what, five, six years ago? when I was looking at how to grade and learning about pedagogy pretty much on my own stick - because they don't teach you how to teach in grad school for the most part, they just drop you in and say, "have fun." I had never heard of formative assessment before, and I knew what summative assessment was, I just didn't know the term.

Adam: So a summative assessment? We're all familiar with that. It's a test, it's a quiz, it's an essay. They get graded and the grades affect the student's overall score for the class. But a lot of people, teachers and students, are not familiar with formative assessment. And a formative assessment is designed to allow students to make mistakes and learn something from them.

Adam: So you give them a pop quiz and it's graded, but it doesn't go in the grade book. It's scored, so that you know, okay, this is how many they missed. But you do that in order to find out "where don't they understand things so we can go over them?" That's a fantastic learning tool. A quick writing assignment that allows the student to explore a topic or an idea? You don't need to grade that. But too many of us are drilling the students for exams only, and so we don't give them these sort of unbound learning experiences that would increase their learning and inspire their growth.

Adam: So we need to think about the assessments we give - are they formative or are they summative? And we should be doing a lot more formative work and a lot less summative work. Because the summative work is the kind where, if the student makes a mistake, it blows their grade out of the water. It's Pearl Harbor, you know? It's Chernobyl. It's going to cause an enormous difficulty getting the grade that they may need to get. And it frightens them too, so we want to avoid that.

Adam: So think about whether your exams are formative or summative. Think about whether you're using quizzes in a formative or summative way. If your goal is to increase learning and, folks, at this point, it really should be the goal - then you've got to get away from all the summative testing that stresses students out every few weeks.

Dinur: So then the next question is, how do we meaningfully assess our students? And one idea is the idea of gamification. Things like awarding badges or trophies, or when students have shown competence or mastery in one area, they level up to the next step. They go to something a little bit more difficult. They earn experience points, they earn XP. You turn learning into a game. You make learning fun; you make it a quest for them.

Adam: And I want to mention here, a friend of mine posts a quote from the internet every day. And I had forgotten I wrote this, but at some point, apparently, I said, "maybe I should tell my students that this is leveling up, that that's what they're doing. That this quiz is like, just a basic, "You're grinding for points - for experience points. And then this small exam is like a mid-level boss. And then the final is this huge boss." And you know, you have to learn how to level up."

Adam: And the thing is, a lot of people may see gamification as frivolous, but it's not. And some of them may see, Oh, it's participation trophies. No, because you don't get the badge or the trophy unless you level up. But the thing is, the more you make anything like a game, the better it works.

Adam: Back when the Internet was first becoming a thing back when - back during the Information Revolution in the 80s there was a saying among software creators: "the more game-like the serious software is, the better it will sell." And they're right. The more fun it is, the better it will sell. Well, if you've got to "sell" your students on learning all of the different battles of the Civil War, and you award them a leveled-up badge because they've got them all, that makes it more fun than just, "Oh, I wrote them all down on an exam."

Adam: Now another thing, and I do this a lot is iteration grading, and this is also known as "ungrading," where, "Here's the standard. Do your assignment." You turn in the assignment. Let's say that it's a short essay. Let's say they've got to turn in a five paragraph essay, right? And you grade them based on the rubric and then you give it back to them and say, "Okay, here's your criticism; improve it." And they have to keep doing it over and over again until they reach the point where you have nothing left to critique - where they've done it well enough that they meet the standard. I read about a professor who said, "Their job is to give it to me until I have no job. Their job is to give it to me until I have nothing left to correct, because if there's something left to correct, they haven't done their job yet."

Now, some students will look at this and say, "Oh, it's a grind," but some students will go, "I get more than one chance? Really?" So it's really important if you're going to do an iterative kind of grading or upgrading to sell them on it and say, "Look, the reason that we're doing it this way is because this gives you the chance to screw up and not have to be punished for it," because too many students see an F or a D as punishment, not just feedback.

Dinur: You could go to standards-based grading or a pass/fail system. So there's no "gentleman's C." The students have to show that they're competent or they're grade is "they didn't start" or it's a zero. So it's not, "Hey, I got to this point," it's "I got to this point because I showed I understand the material, or I did this skill well enough so that I can advance." And that way the emphasis is on them passing, and then they can move up, they can level up, like we just said. You make it a game. Now they're onto the next part in their journey in your class.

Adam: And it's not like you can't combine these, too. I mean, you know, gamification goes really well with standards based grading. And iteration also goes really well with the next idea, which is metacognitive reflection. So this is where you ask the students to reflect on what they've done. Maybe they compare it to a rubric. Or maybe you ask them, "Okay, in this assignment, what did you learn? And back that up. Here's a list of standards. Did you meet these standards? Tell me, you know, how did you do on this? How did you do on that? Do you think you wrote your thesis statement well? Okay, how does it match the standard? Do you think that you did well in developing the ideas in your body paragraphs? Okay, here's the standard for how that looks. Does your work look like that?"

Adam: And Caitlin Tucker, who I love, has an example of how to measure their growth over time. And in this measurement - and we're, again, we're linking to this in the show notes, too - you have the students, in the middle of the semester, like, say, week nine, you know, and you tell them, "Okay, I want you to go and look at the first piece of work you turned in. And then I want you to look at one that you turned in just last week. And for each piece, list, how'd you do? Where do you see mistakes? Where do you see things that you could improve? And then compare the two things."

Adam: And what students look at the comparison, as they look at the comparison, they're like, "I had no idea I had come so far, so much further. You know, I didn't realize how much development I'd had, how much learning I've got, how many new skills I've really started to hammer down, you know, nail down and use!"

Adam: And it startles them. But it also helps them see: it may not feel like you're learning, but when you compare early work to current work and you've got this framework of how to do it, it blows their minds. Like, students will go, "I realize now why you were hammering on making sure that I got my citations done correctly in the annotated bibliography prep, because I'm going to need them in the, in the research paper. And I see now that having that done makes my life easier. And it also makes it possible for me to focus more on what I'm saying, not just how I'm saying it, if I get that out of the way early." Right? Or a student might say, "Well, I can see why procrastination is a big problem for me. I didn't realize how big of a problem it was, but I could see I should have improved more between week one and week nine. And the main reason I haven't is because I keep on putting it off."

Adam: And for this metacognitive reflection allows students to then say, "All right, given the improvement that I see from week one to week nine, if I were willing to assign myself a grade at this point, this is the grade I would give myself." And also, one of the things I've read in the literature about this is, when you ask the student for feedback on what they think their grade should be, they will almost always be harder on themselves than you would have been. So make sure that you kind of maybe head that off at the pass a little bit, too.

Adam: So Dinur and I were talking about this and he said, "Well, I've never seen this, you know, this qualitative rubric thing." So there was an idea that was qualitative rubrics, where you grade the student but you don't give them a grade. You just give them comments on a rubric. So Dinur and I talked about it, and we developed, well, maybe this is the way. So this is one way that we are planning on trying with our students in the coming semesters.

Dinur: Right? And it's called the reflection rubric. And in this version of grading, you as the teacher make comments on an assignment using an in-depth rubric. So that's going to be the first part is, you want your rubric to be very well defined, very explicit, very clear. And then your students submit a reflection on the comments that you've given them before they see any grade. And you can establish this in whatever way works for your assignments, whether that's pass/fail percentage, letter grade, whichever.

Dinur: So your students have to give you:

- one comment that surprised them, and why
- one comment that did not surprise them, and why
- two ways they can improve
- two things they felt they did well
- what grade they would give themselves, based on the rubric and the comments, and why

Dinur: And you as the teacher look it over and say, "Okay, I accept your judgment, but here's where I had you. Here's where you have you." If they're close, maybe you get, you give the student the benefit of the doubt. Or if, like Adam said, they're super hard on themselves, you average it.

Dinur: So if they said, "I thought I deserved a D on this paper." And you go, "Well, you know, this was actually pretty decent. It was like a C-plus to B-minus paper, let me average that, you'll get a C." That way they get some of your compassion. They have to take their feedback into account so that they can't say, "Well, I got ripped off, I got a bad grade," because they would've been giving themselves a much lower grade.

Dinur: The flip side is also true if they're trying to inflate their grade. If you're like, "Yeah, this paper was a C-minus at best, and you said you deserved an A-minus, let's see where we're, where we're not clicking here."

Adam: Like you might say to them, "Okay, so this rubric is for college level work." They may still be operating on a high school framework where, five paragraphs, and you've given them an eight-page paper. So that's not five paragraphs. That's more like seven or eight paragraphs, right? But they're still very much in the high school mindset.

Adam: And when you talk with them about it, you might say, "Okay, here's the issue." And again, this can go with iterative grading where they give you their reflection and then you say, okay, based on your reflection, you need to now redo this assignment or improve this assignment. Turn it in and we'll do it again. Right.

Adam: And for those of you who aren't working with written work, like, math teachers for example, I read about a math teacher who did something similar to - granted, it was in the grades, but I'm sure you could, you could do this in college too.

Adam: You give back their assignment or their test, and you mark the ones that are wrong, and then they have to figure out, "Okay, why is this wrong?" And then they turn it in again with the mistakes corrected. And they can work in groups. You know, you might turn it back, like just have a day where it's "turn back the exam day" and you give them back their midterms and they get into groups. And you say, "okay, you have until the end of this period, you know the end of this class meeting to correct as many of these as you can. Turn it in on a new piece of paper and write down "question four. This was my answer. I see that I went wrong here. This is the correct answer." "Question seven, this is the wrong answer that I put down. Here's my best guess at the correct answer," And then you turn them in." And if they manage to correct their mistakes, then you give them additional credit.

Adam: So that's another way of doing this kind of thing where they look at their work, they look at your comments, but you don't indicate why it's wrong. You just mark off: question four, question seven, question nine, those are incorrect. They get them back and they have to figure out during the class period, "okay, how do I fix this?"

Adam: If it's a longer exam, like maybe it's an exam that's a hundred questions, you might want to give it to them as a take-it-home assignment where they go home, maybe they meet with their study group and they go, "I have no idea how question four was done, help me." And if they can do it correctly, when they turn it back in, then you give them the credit for it.

Adam: So another way - and this is yet another way that can be merged with several other types of grading we've talked about - is additive grading. Again, this is the level-up method. I use this. So the way that I do my classes these days is, there are groups of assignments. Like, they have a group of exams or quizzes; and then they have a group of journals, which is a reflection assignment; and they've got a group of terms and concepts lists; and they've got a group of part of the writing project - so there's like seven different steps in the writing project, each one is a group. For each group they complete, it's one step more towards their letter grade.

Adam: So in my class there are either 14 or 15 groups, depending on the class. And I have set it that nine is a B. So if they finish 10 groups, it's, it's a B-plus. And if they finish 11 groups, then it's an a minus. And if they finish 12 groups, then it's an eight and why do I have 15 groups?

Adam: But I set the cutoff as a at 12 because not everybody's going to do everything. It's a ton of work and they get to pick what they're going to do. So this allows students to also say, "All right, I'm going to do six groups and that gets me a C and then I can move on with my life and I don't have to be in this class anymore." Okay, that's fine. You have to accept that. Some of them may decide they want the C, and that's okay.

Adam: But then if they decide they want a C-plus, they do one extra group. And usually it's anywhere from five to 10 assignments inside the group. So it's not like it's a small amount of work, but it's usually stuff that can be done in half an hour to 45 minutes per assignment. So each group is worth probably three to four hours total of work.

Adam: And so this additive grading thing, now, when I read about it - some students may react to this the way that a character in a book I read reacted, He called it the "French dictation method" versus the "history essay method." And this is from a book by Grant Naylor called *Red Dwarf*. And what we do is what this character calls the "French dictation method," which is where you start with a hundred, and then every time you screw up points get taken off - or the history essay method, where you start with zero and the more things you do right or do completely, the more points you add.

Adam: So I have to tell my students at the beginning of every semester, "You're starting at zero. Everybody in this class has a WU right now, and nobody's going to be able to achieve a C until probably week eight or nine, because that's when there will be enough things available for you to have completed enough groups to get to at least six groups completed. But you build from zero and everything you do increases your grade."

Adam: So this is where, the additive grading method - they don't have to worry about the final exam tanking their class grade, or that final paper tanking their class grade. It can only help them. It can't hurt them. We don't penalize. We add.

Adam: And it is hard for some students to get accustomed to this, because they're so used to being penalized. Like I still get the plaintive email every single semester. "If I take the final and I don't pass it, what happens?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

“Nothing.”

“But, but it's the final!”

“Yeah, but if you bombed it, then it just doesn't count toward your grade. It doesn't add anything.”

But the grades in this class, once you get your Ct, you have your C. It's not going to go away. And for some students and for some professors that's very hard to wrap your minds around. But it's really important that we change this because this A - F, “you will be penalized if you screw up” grading system, is not serving our students. All it's doing is stressing them out - and not in positive ways. This is not stressed. That's going to lead to achievement. What it is is stress that's going to lead to dropping out and giving up. And we want to stop that from happening.

Dinur: And I tend to grade my students' term papers similar to the way Adam grades his classes. Like, my students start with zero points, because I haven't read that paper, I don't have anything to evaluate. And then as I go along, I go, “Okay, this was a pretty good thesis statement,” or “Hey, this could have been done a little bit better, but I see where you were going.” So I add points based on how well I think the reaching metrics are laid out in the rubrics and I feel like that makes me a nicer, or a more generous, grader because I'm looking for things to reward, rather than things to penalize.

Dinur: It's kind of like refereeing. If you look hard enough, you can find a foul, an infraction, a mistake, on almost anything you find. And let's be real: you've made plenty of mistakes yourself, as have we. If your mentality is, “I'm gonna nickel and dime, and look for every mistake,” you're gonna make your life miserable; you're going to make your student's lives miserable. If you start with the, “Hey, you're starting at zero, we're building up,” then it's - I think it's a more holistic, it's a more growth-based approach because you're growing the score from nothing, just as they're developing their skills from relatively nothing before - no offense to any students listening - to more complete now. So you're rewarding that progress, more than you're looking for someone to meet, really, an impossible objective of perfection.

Adam: And I'd like to speak to something that just came to mind for me about this. I know that there will be professors who say, “Well, what about rigor?” Okay. My response to you is “A lot of times, rigor, these days, looks like rigor mortis,” where we have a fixed mindset about what they should do and what they should do to get there. And you know, Dinur, this actually makes me think of the strain theory - this is a sociology thing - and the idea is that there are approved goals and then there are approved ways to get there. And if we get too hung up on how they managed to understand this thing, unless that process is absolutely necessary, then demanding it is not rigor. Demanding it is narrow-mindedness. It's a very fixed mindset about “the only way you can do this is by doing it this exact way.”

Adam: And the problem with that is that's not rigor. We might think of it as rigor, because we went through it when we were in grad school or in undergrad, and it felt like bootcamp. College should not feel like bootcamp, all right? College should not feel like we're breaking them down to build them back up. We should be adding on, and finding what they do well, and doing more of that, helping them do more of that.

Adam: I had a student in a soc class once, an intro soc class, whose final project - he was a sound engineer. That was what he was getting a degree in, was basically sound engineering, mixing for singers, right? And especially for rappers. And he gave me a rap song that he wrote about the three main theoretical schools in sociology. I still play that for my students. I said, “May I have a - is it okay if I use a copy of this?” Like, and he

says, "Sure, man. I mean, I would never have done this before, but this is really cool." And it's this really awesome little rap song about sociology, of all things. If I hadn't let him play to his strengths, if I demanded a paper, he would not have produced nearly as good work. But don't tell me it wasn't rigorous, because it was.

Dinur: So then, the next big question for us is, how do we meaningfully report our students' progress? Well, the competency-based transcript allows for qualitative descriptions of student work that go far beyond giving them an A, a C, or an F. You're actually writing out, "Here's the progress I'm seeing. I'm seeing really good development in your writing. I'm seeing really good development in how you're assessing and using academic sources when you write your papers. I'm seeing how much better you are managing your time. And I see how much less stressed you are because of that." You're giving a more complete story than a letter grade could give.

Adam: Or even a letter of recommendation could give! And this is part of Scott Looney's idea of - back to the gentleman we talked about with the Hawkins School in Cleveland - and he's established the Mastery Transcript Consortium, back in April of 2017. There are about 160 schools in this consortium. And it includes institutions like Phillips Exeter, and also alternative schools like the Khan Lab School, and each school commits to phasing out its existing GPA and grade based transcripts, and instead they create basically a website on each student that says, "Here's how they're doing on critical thinking, on creativity, on self-directed learning, but also core content stuff like logic and algebraic reasoning and grammar." And instead of earning their credit hours and receiving grades for them, they're taking courses to show, "Okay, I've developed the ability to critically think. I have developed the ability to self-direct my learning. I have developed the ability to problem solve." And Looney has put these together, and he insists that admissions officers are going to be able to read these in two minutes or less.

Adam: Well, we could develop something like that just for our classrooms and say, "All right, I'm going to give you this competency-based transcript, this competency-based grade, and I'm going to give you how well you did on these 12 things that you need to know coming out of this class." And then you sit down and talk with them and say, "All right, given this, where do you think you stand in this class? What grade would you give yourself?" Communicating with the student about, "This is how I've assessed you. Do you disagree? In what ways? Do you agree? In what ways? And given this, what grade would you give yourself?"

Adam: And the portfolio is similar to this, but instead of this giving assessments of their work, it actually shows their work: "Here is a paper that they wrote that demonstrates their critical thinking in these five ways," and then you actually put that piece of work in the portfolio. There's lots of LMS systems these days that have portfolio repositories. And so - I know that for example, Blackboard does, you can create a portfolio and say the students have to submit their best work to this, and then you grade them on their best work.

Adam: And it shows that they've achieved this skill or they've reached this mastery point or they've met the standard, and the portfolio is just another way of doing that. And this is good for, especially students who are getting bachelor's degrees in things where they will need to show their work. Like, remember when we had Tom Norman on in Episode 40, and he talked about "put a portfolio together of your best work, of your best coding or of your best work in this class and show me," so that as an employer I can look at the portfolio. So the portfolio actually goes beyond the class too. It can be something that they can use as a showcase of their skills.

Dinur: And I use the portfolio a lot when my students ask me for letters of recommendation because when I write them a letter, I want to be able to concretely say and have evidence saying, "Hey, they were really, really good with writing. They were really, really sharp." And if it's been a few semesters since they had my class, I

might not remember each and every comment they made in class. But if they have that portfolio ready, and if they show me, "Here's my resume, here are papers I've written for your class and for other classes," then that lets me speak so much more deeply to what I've seen from them that it helps me write them a stronger letter. So it, so the portfolio is your students helping themselves, and helping you. And they're helping themselves in more ways than they may realize because, like Adam said, you're judging them on their best work so they have control over what they're presenting.

Dinur: It helps as far as potential employability. If you show a future employer, "here's the level of work that I can do," and it helps as far as letters of recommendation for students thinking about graduate school after they get the BA because okay, now we've got something that we've established, we can write about it and we can speak much more deeply about your skills, your being the students when we write them their letter.

Dinur: Now, if your school requires you to produce actual letter grades, and I'm guessing there are many schools that do that, then set aside time to talk with each student about what their letter grade they feel they earned, based on their work. So kind of like what Adam said, you're giving them a lot of chances for input. You're telling them, "Okay, here's the standards for the class. Based on that, what grade would you give you and why?"

Dinur: And you can discuss whether or not they've assessed themselves properly, whether you think they're grade should be averaged with your assessment, and if you really think that they are way out in left field, they're way too harsh or they're way too light, then set aside more time and talk it through, because there's something that's not getting communicated at at that point.

Adam: And I read about one professor while we were doing the research for this who basically said, "I nearly always give the student the grade they feel they've earned, but they have to talk with me about it first."

Now, Dinur's already mentioned some of his experience with this, like the letters of recommendation. The portfolio is a great way to do that. And you know I've talked about how I do additive grading. But we're going to talk about a couple of our other experiences with this, and then we'll talk about how students can use this and then how teachers can use it.

Dinur: So I do a little bit of iteration for my students, but it's really the students who don't do well on their term papers. And what I'll do is I'll read through their papers, and I'll send them an email privately saying, "Hey, are you sure this is the version of the paper you'd like me to grade? Or do you have a different version you'd like me to, uh, read over? Because I'm seeing these major problems in your paper and if you have me read it, your grade probably won't be as high as you'd like it."

Dinur: And I try and phrase it somewhat directly, somewhat gently too, because you don't know what each student is going through. So you'd - so for me, I'd rather be more compassionate, but that compassion doesn't mean I'm going to pass a bad paper. Uh, what I'll do is I'll tell them, "Here are the major problems. Are you sure you don't have another version of the paper you'd like me to grade?" And that's kind of my code for, "you might want to redo this."

Now I'll, I'll insert on the grade book the grade that that original paper would have earned. And it's normally not very high, and that will sometimes - sometimes seeing the grade sparks the student to respond. Sometimes the email will. It kind of depends what works well for each student, but I let them revise that paper until it at least gets a C. And that way I can see that they've improved; I care more that they've improved the in that they

didn't write a good paper by the deadline, but I'm not about to give an excellent paper for a paper that needed revisions after the buzzer, so to speak.

Adam: One of the things that I want to bring out, because I've talked a little bit - I've talked in other episodes about my standards-based, pass/fail level grading, and the iterative process, I've talked about that a lot - but I also want to say that the iterative process and the additive grading process - really, we have to work on breaking the mindset of the student that is "one and done." That "I turned it in once and that's it. I get one shot and that's it." The one shot mindset is so fixed and it is so antithetical to learning. And so something I do on the first day of classes, I say, "This is not a one and done class. I expect you to improve your work. When I give it back to you, it is not over just because you got a grade on it, the grade can be changed, improved, worked with if you do the work."

Adam: I've had some students say "His class is so much work cause you have to keep doing it over and over again!" Well but if you do it better than you only have to do it over a couple of times. So you need to make iteration valuable to the students and explain to them why it's valuable. Tell them "I'm not focusing on your grade, I'm focusing on how well you're learning this, and until you meet the standard you haven't learned it. So I keep giving you chances to show me that you've learned it."

Adam: And sometimes it's something simple. Like I'll have a student turn in the terms and concepts, I look through it and I find that three of them are not filled in - that there's, you know, 25 terms and concepts and they only defined 22 of them. I send it back to them and "Say this is incomplete. Fix it." I don't tell them anything more than that because then it makes them look for the mistakes.

Adam: Or Dinur, you might say, you know, in your iterative process you might say, "I'm really noticing a lot of spelling and grammar problems," but then just leave it at that. Then they need to go to the writing center and get some help with the spelling and grammar, so that they can figure out their own mistakes.

Adam: Another type of iterative grading that I don't use because I don't get - I don't have people turn things in in hard copy, that I read about a professor who did, he would simply put a dot in, you know, in pen next to any line that had a mistake in it, in an essay or a paper. And then he'd give it back to the students and their job was to figure out what the mistake was on that line. And so that forced them to learn because they had to go and find it out themselves.

Adam: There's a scene in a book by Robert Heinlein, where the main character's boss-mentor tells her something and she says, "I can't believe that." And he said, "See, I should've made you go find it out yourself. Then you would've known it, but you've only been told." And too many students expect us to just tell them, but I would like them to actually figure out, "What is it that I need to figure out? What is it that I need to do here?"

Adam: What I will do is in the learning management system, with the terms and concepts list, if they have a mistake, like if they've got a bad definition or they have not explained the concept correctly, I don't put a note in there or a comment saying, you know, "the actual answer to this is blah blah." I will just highlight it, and then I'll send it back to them saying, "highlighted areas are mistakes. You need to fix that." And then it's up to them to figure out, "what was the mistake and how do I fix it?"

Dinur: Now the way students can use this information, and we realize this has been geared towards teachers, but something Adam and I have pointed out repeatedly is, your grades assess how you did on one particular thing. In one class, at one time. It was one test, it was one paper, it was one reflection. That's all it is. It doesn't tell us who you are as a student, and as hard as it is to hear, probably, your grades are not who you are. They

just tell us how you did on a collection of assignments and tests and how engaged you are in a class at one point in your life. It doesn't tell us anything beyond that.

Adam: So, the way to handle this, students, is to shift your focus to what you're learning. Do your best to stop thinking about what you'll get for what you're learning. Because paradoxically, this will actually produce both more learning and better scores. If you stop thinking about the points, you'll do better on the exam.

Dinur: Right? Kind of like when we've said, when you talk to your professor, talk about how you can improve from one test to the next or one paper to the next, but don't bring up the points. This is that idea. How can you grow? How can you become a more complete student? How can you prepare yourself for life beyond college? Don't just focus on the points.

Dinur: Now the way teachers can use this - and we've geared this episode towards teachers - is well, one, get your students to stop thinking about the points they'll earn and instead have them start thinking about the point of the lesson, right? It's kind of the inverse of what I told my students on their term paper, which is "the faster you make your points, the faster I award you your points." Get your students to think about the goal of "What are we going over in class today? What are we going over in class this week?" Build up from the lesson to the week to the unit, and hopefully by the end of this semester they see kind of the growth and the progression that they've made. And the whole idea is, again, we're emphasizing growth and change and progress; we're not emphasizing the letter at the end of the semester.

Adam: And this means you've got to be transparent too. And I know I've mentioned her before, but Mary Anne Winkelmes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, put together the transparent assignment and if you haven't seen this, I really recommend that you search - she's on chronicle.com, I believe is where we found this. I don't have the article to hand, but we'll see if we can dig it up and put it in the show notes - but the transparent assignment is, you go beyond telling them "12 point font, one inch margins, double-spaced," and you tell them "the reason you're doing this assignment is..."

Adam: So for example, if I have my students do an in class activity on, let's say, social change, I will say "the reason you are doing this assignment is so that you better understand the different kinds of social change, the pattern of social change and the progress of social change movements." Okay? Now they know why they're doing it and I'm sure that most of them can say, "Oh, I want to be a social worker. I need to know about social change because that's going to affect the people that I work with."

Adam: Right? You might even have them, to get them to stop thinking about the points they'll earn and instead think about the points of the lesson, have them articulate the point of why they're doing this as part of the assignment. Like, at the very beginning of the assignment ask them, "What is the point of this assignment? What are you supposed to get out of it?" And tell them that they're not allowed to say "I'm supposed to get 15 points out of this." They're not allowed to tie it to the grade. They have to find a different way to do it.

Adam: And another way to do this, to kind of force this, stop them from thinking about the points is see how you might be able to modify your grading or move away from the A - F grading to something that just does not map to A - F easily.

Adam: One of the questions I get from my students a lot on the rubric that I use for qualitative work, so I call it the EMRU rubric and that's "exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," "revise and resubmit" or "unsatisfactory" - E M R U. Right. And I've had students ask, and it's actually in my course FAQ, "how does this map to the A - F grading system?" And I tell them "It doesn't, and that's by design. Because I want you to get

away from thinking about this as A - F. I want you to think about, “Did I meet the standard, did I exceed the standard? Do I need to revise and resubmit this, because I didn't do this thing right and I didn't meet the standard?” That's what I want you to be thinking about - is the point of why you're doing this, not how many points you'll get from it.”

Adam: So that's what we have for you in Episode 51. 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 52, when Adam and I talk about how to do things right without being stressed out all the time.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!