



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

Episode 53: Reading in Depth With the 3x3 Method

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.

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 53 - hey, our first episode of our second year of podcasting!

Adam: Look at that! We never thought we would make it this far, but we did! (Be afraid. Be very afraid.)

Dinur: Right.

Adam: Anyway -

Dinur: I know I am.

Adam: Anyway. Episode 53 -

Dinur: - and this is all about how to read directions closely,

Adam: So, students, have you ever had this situation? You looked over the directions, you did what you thought they said, but you were in a hurry. And then you get back your assignment, or whatever it was that you turned in, and they said "You didn't follow the directions. You didn't do this correctly. Go back and read the directions." And you're thinking, "but I did!"

Adam: No, you really didn't.

Adam: Generally, these days, students skim anything they're given to read, whether it's directions, syllabi, an article, a book, a poem, whatever. And because you're skimming, you miss stuff. If there's anything you must, must, must read in depth, it's the directions. And yet, too many students are skimming them, the same way they skim their reading assignments. So today we're going to talk about why students do this. We're going to

give you a method to read closely, so you do get all the details. And we're going to list a few ways to encourage students to use this method, for teachers.

Dinur: Now, why do students skim? Well, a lot of the times students feel rushed. They don't read well. They might be tired. They're overwhelmed. You know, whether they're student athletes and they've got the demands of the sport, whether they're working a part time job, whether they've got family obligations, whether they've taken too many classes - they've bitten off more than they can chew. They're tired. They're overwhelmed. And so, at some point, some of that energy and that focus kind of goes wayward and they start skimming. But when they do so, they end up losing out on a lot of valuable points, and a lot of valuable learning.

Adam: I had a student once who told me that they read by the "bullet point method." If it wasn't a bullet point or in bold type, then it wasn't important. They missed so much. And I can't bold everything - and if I bold everything in a set of directions, then it's not bolded, because now it's all bolded, so none of it's bolded.

Adam: And I have had students come to my office hours and say, "how do I do blah blah assignment? You gave me it back - you know, like, let's say "You gave me back my annotated bibliography, and I thought I did everything right" - and I will just say, "Get out the directions."

Adam: "What?"

Adam: "Get out the directions, and I'm going to have you sit there and read them, and then after you're done reading them, you tell me what didn't make sense." 90% of the time, they will get halfway down the second page and go, "Oh! Oh, I get it now," and they'll get up and leave. Why? Because I made them read the directions. But students, the ones who come in and do that, they've wasted a ton of time by me having to make them read the directions. And they could have already had this assignment done correctly, if they had taken that time two weeks ago, when they were doing the assignment on their own.

Adam: So, Dinur mentioned a bunch of different reasons why students do it. But this is going to be a short episode, because there's just going to be: "Here's the method; here's how you use it; teachers, here's how you make sure your students know they need to," and then we're going to be done. Because this is just a real quick episode, unlike episode 51, which we just finished recording, like, half an hour ago.

Adam: So the method that I developed with my students is what I call the 3x3 method. And the funny thing is, I had it in our notes, you know, "the 3x3 method," and I said to Dinur, "I don't remember where I put this." So I had to go dig through my old class notes. And then I found it.

Adam: So, the 3x3 method is: you have to read it three times, in three different ways. So, take the syllabus or the set of directions or the writing prompt, and then you're going to take it one sentence at a time. And you're going to read the sentence with your eyes, which is the way we normally read. It involves your sense of sight. Then you're going to read it out loud, and this is going to involve the sense of hearing and speech. Then - and this is the sticky part - you're going to write down what you think that sentence means, in your own words. This is where you will immediately figure out, "I don't understand this." If you can't write it down in your own words, then you don't understand it.

Adam: And, so, look at these as ways to catch the teacher not being clear, if you want to think of it that way. If you want to look at it as that kind of a challenge, then do this. But again, the three steps in the 3x3 reading method - and this is mainly for reading directions and syllabi. I'm not going to tell you to read, like, a novel this way, but if you are reading directions or the syllabus - read the line with your eyes, then read it out loud so you

can hear it and say it, and then write it down. What do you think it actually means? Don't copy it. Write it down in your own words. And the ones that you can't write down in your own words easily or quickly or pretty well? You'll know: "This is something I don't understand. I've got to go talk to the professor about line six, 'cause I have no idea what he means when he says 'signposts.' And I need to know what that means 'cause I have no idea what that means."

Dinur: Now, this is not a quick process. And Adam and I've talked a lot about the tradeoff that you make. It's fast, it's correct, and stress-free. And you can have two out of those three, but not all three. So assuming you want it to be stress-free, would you rather it be faster? Correct. Well, you want the grade, you're going to care about it being correct. So let's take speed, again, out of the equation.

Dinur: So reading a syllabus or a set of instructions using the 3x3 method, well, it may mean you're taking a half hour to an hour to get through a two-page set of directions. It might take longer if you're going through a full syllabus.

Dinur: But this should be really useful because now you know what doesn't make sense. I remember, like Adam just said, "If you can't write something down in your own words, then it doesn't make sense to you." Well, that's going to save you time later, when your confusion might otherwise lead you to make mistakes because you didn't understand the directions well enough. You can come up and say, "Hey, I'm not sure what you mean when you're saying, 'I want a very clear thesis statement' here." Or, "what do you mean when you say 'back up this theory with X amount of examples from the book or from a movie'?" You haven't wasted time writing a paper that's bad, so you're not redoing it. You're just taking more time on the front end to make sure that the rest of the assignment goes smoothly.

Adam: And I'll give other examples too. I've had students come up and say, "What does it mean to develop the thesis?" And I realized, "You know, I never talked about that." Okay, sometimes this will even help your professor realize, "I need to be more clear. I need to say, do the students actually understand this or am I just assuming knowledge that they may not have yet?"

Adam: Now Dinur has not yet used this method with his students, because I've literally just dropped it on him in the last week or so. And we are in the middle of semesters right now. We're starting work, I think what, next week? Classes start next week. So, I instituted this last year, though, and then my students just started coming to me with questions about the directions for the very first time. And then they got them cleared up. And then they started doing the work, and doing the work for them and doing the grading for me suddenly became a lot less stressful.

Adam: A couple of students pointed out places I had not been clear in my instructions, so I went back and I edited them until they said, "Okay, that's clear now." I've never had students ask about those areas of the instructions ever again. So this helps your teachers, too. And teachers, be aware: if your student comes to you and says, "I have no idea what 'develop a thesis' means" - ask yourself, "Have I taught them what that meant? Because if I didn't, it's on me that I need to let them know: this is what it means to develop a thesis. And if I haven't told them, I can't expect them to do what they have not been told how to do."

Dinur: Now, like Adam said, I haven't used this method on my classes, but I did do something pretty similar when I worked as a tutor. And that would be, I would walk students through the directions verbally. So they would get an assignment from - typically a lot of high school students - and I would tell them, "Okay, what is confusing? What do you need to do, step by step, in order to write this paper, or in order to finish this project?" And so it was working with them one-on-one to be able to see where there's confusion, where directions might

not be clear, and for - it was a way to try and get them, especially if it was a project for high school, get them to break that down to smaller pieces. So some of the stuff that we've talked about on the podcast can really apply to all levels of learning, not just college.

Adam: Yeah. And now that I think about it, I had a client who is in their first year of college - I have never seen more dreadful assignment guidelines, or directions, than they got from this one teacher, to the point where I actually sent an email to the school saying, "This is what this teacher's giving students. I can't figure out what they want. And if I can't figure out what they want, the students certainly can't figure out what they want. Maybe someone should talk to this teacher about, oh, I don't know, transparent directions."

Adam: So, when we talk about this, we're going to talk about how students can use this method and then teachers, how you can bring the method to your students.

Adam: So students - like Dinur said, we're taking speed out of the equation, because if you do it fast and you do it with low-stress, it's not going to be good work. You need to have good work. And if you want to do it high stress, then speed through it and you'll get good work. But the problem is you'll stress yourself out. We want you to lower your stress. So think of this process of reading in depth, of reading deeply, as an investment of time into something that is going to benefit you in a number of ways. \

Adam: First, it's going to save you time later when you're writing the paper, because you won't get stuck in the third line of the paper going, "what do they mean by that thing in the directions? I have no idea what they're talking about." Okay. Then you have to stop your process and go talk to the teacher. That takes time. That puts stress on you that, "Oh God, I might not get this paper done." So think of it as it benefiting you in that it's saving you time and stress later.

Adam: And think about how much easier it will be to do the assignment if you are certain, like, you are confident that you know you understand these instructions upfront, you don't have to worry about "What does that mean, 'signposts'?" because you've already clarified that, instead of just hoping that you will understand them, or assuming that you'll understand them, and then getting the paper back with red pen all over it and then realizing, "Oh, I didn't do this right, but I don't understand how I didn't do it right."

Dinur: For students: You want to get together with your study group to go over a set of directions, all right? Adam and I've talked about why you want to study with other people, and this is just another way that having several sets of eyes and mouths and ears really goes a long way. You know, if everyone's on the same page with "here's what we need to do for this project, here's what we need to do for this paper, here's what's on the test," then great, you're all, like, thinking along the same lines and hopefully that means, you know, that there's not that much confusion.

Dinur: But if there are differences, then you want to figure out where those differences in interpretations are, and that way you can go to your teacher, go to your professor and say, "Hey, some of us think you mean this. Others think something else. What do you mean by this?" And that way, you can get clarification. And again, you haven't lost points on an assignment. If you're doing this early on in the term, it's still leaving you with more than enough time to get the work done well, and so, hopefully you're not stressing out about it.

Adam: And I had a student group once that came to me and said, "Some of us do think you mean this, but others of us think you mean that." And I couldn't understand why they would think the second thing. So I said, "Explain to me how that looks like that." And when they explained it, then I realized why they might take it that way, and the other group of students also understood why they might take it that way. And we all agreed that

no, the first group of students was actually right, but I needed to fix my wording, cause there was a sentence in there that was so misleading and so ambiguous - and I was so embarrassed. I'm like, "Wow, that was a mistake. Let me fix that so that you're not getting this weird, non-transparent, opaque set of directions that don't actually tell you what you need to know."

Adam: So, that takes us to how teachers can use it. And first, just use it as feedback on your instructions. They come to you and say, "I don't get it"? Then fix it. And then, the second thing is, you've got to demonstrate to the students what happens when you don't read all the directions. So the classic method, and I'm sure you've gone through this at least once: you give the students an exercise, and it's just a list of steps, and it starts with "number one, read this entire list of activities before doing any of them." And then follow it by a number of activities. "Write something on the board, cluck like a chicken, count aloud to six, hand a note to someone else, draw a box around number eight..." And then the last line is something like, "20. Don't do anything on this list except step 20: put your name at the top of this paper and turn it in."

Adam: There will be lots of students who will have written on the board and clucked like a chicken and handed notes and drawn boxes. And then you talk about how, "Okay, this is what happens when you do not read the directions carefully. You wind up looking like an idiot in front of the class."

Adam: And don't put anything on the list of things that they aren't supposed to do - except they're, you know, they're going to do them - that might be terribly embarrassing, like, don't, you know, don't put "take off your shirt" or anything like that. Don't do that to your students. But do things that will make it clear that they did not read the directions before they started following them. And the thing, is if the directions say "read all of this before doing any of them," and the student ignores that, that means they haven't read the directions. And it will really bring it home to them: "I've got to read the directions."

Dinur: And if you want to check to see if students are reading directions, you might want to put something in the middle of them. Something like "When you reach this line, go to your school email and send me a picture of an elephant, a dragon, a unicorn, a kitten," and see how many of your students actually do it. You might want to give a few points of extra credit, or use this as a demonstration of why it's important to read closely. And I know Adam had - Adam had messaged me earlier this week with something like, "I just got my first unicorn of the semester" -

Adam: - now I have five -

Dinur: - and he showed me what he was talking about, and it was because in his syllabus on one of the pages it said, "When you get here, I want you to send me a picture of a unicorn."

Adam: And I've had five students do that so far, but I have about 200 students this semester, so we'll see how it goes. I am going to ask them on the third day of class or on the second day of class, "all right, how many of you sent me a unicorn? Those of you who sent me a unicorn, explain to the rest of your classmates why you did. And then, those of you who didn't, now you know, I know that you did not read the syllabus closely so you need to work on that." And then I'll teach them this method.

Adam: So, and the last thing teachers, is: give students time to practice the 3x3 method, or maybe assign it as homework with reflection. You know, "How well do you feel you understood these directions, compared to the last set of directions you read before you learned this method?" and see if they can say, "I noticed that I'm paying a lot more attention to what things mean, and not just looking for, like, important words like 'grade' or 'points' or whatever. I'm actually paying attention to what they mean." That has been the feedback that I got

from students last semester when I first instituted this, and that's why I'm going to be using it every single semester from here on out, and letting students know: you've got to read in depth, you've got to read for understanding, not just to say you read it.

Dinur: And that goes back to the metacognition that Adam and I talked about in Episode 51, where students look at something they used to do in the past compared to something more recently and see how they've grown and changed. So if they're saying, "I now read directions more closely, I'm more aware that I've got to read through everything" - that's growth. That's progress.

Adam: Now, what do you do specifically with the student who does not read well? There's a couple of possibilities here. The student either just does not read a lot, so they don't like reading; or they're not good at reading, or they may have a disability. So in this specific case, you may want to have them work with someone who goes over the reading with them and makes sure that they don't miss anything. Maybe tell them they've got to go talk to a tutor or a coach.

Adam: But most students, they do read, they just don't like to. So, for the students who don't like to, tell them, "if you read close on the directions, you won't have to read as close on everything else, because the directions tell you what you need to do. They tell you what you need to look for." This also helps students when you're reading something like, even, the directions on a test.

Adam: Now Dinur and I were talking about this, because he said, "Well, could they maybe read it under their breath?" Maybe, but that might come across to the teacher as cheating if you're doing this in a test situation, where everybody's in the same room taking a test. So in that case, what I would do is simply make notes of the important words. We talked about this when we talked about how to take a test, and, you know, you need to underline the important words so that you know "these are the things I need to pay attention to." But by the time you get to the first test, if you've been using this method to read directions through the entire semester, you will probably be better at picking up the important things, even if you can't read it out loud once or twice. And teachers, consider allowing your students to have take-home exams, or to have exams that are taken online, so that they can use this method - because it really does help when you can hear it as well as see it.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 53. 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 54, when we'll talk about the difference between earning something and deserving something.

Adam: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!

