



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

Episode 54: Deserving vs. Earning

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, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 54, Deserving vs. Earning.

Adam: So, many of us have had either the student who comes in, or have been the student who comes in, and says, "Look, I deserve an A. I only got a B on this, but I deserve an A," or worse, "I only got a C on this, but I deserve an A." And that happens a lot, because you've never gotten anything less than an A in your life. But when you do that, that's actually an indicator of either unrealistic expectations about grades, or having always gotten inflated grades, or maybe both.

Dinur: And let's say you get an assignment back, or a test back, and it's a lower grade than what you expected, and your reaction is, "But I deserved a better grade!" Well, in this episode, Adam and I talk about the difference between grades that you earn and grades that you deserve, and how one word promotes a growth mindset, and the other word promotes a fixed mindset. And Adam and I have always been about the growth mindset in this podcast, and that's what we're going to try and emphasize when we talk about saying you "deserve" a grade versus you "earned" a grade. And that said, we want to learn and talk with all of you about how to move forward, doing the work that you need to do, so that you both earn and deserve the grade - so that the grade that you get - that reflects the effort that you feel you put in, because the quality is there.

Dinur: So, if we're talking about two different words, let's define them, just so that we're all on the same page. Because some people think that "deserve" and "earn" mean the same thing, but they don't. When we say "deserve" something, it's defined as being entitled to something, due to your inherent qualities or your previous experiences. And the key part of that definition is "entitled." And to Adam and to me, that suggests a fixed mindset - that there's something so unique about you that how could it anyone miss it? Now that's to "deserve" something.

Dinur: To "earn" something means that you've received something in return for effort. You have to be active with something. That suggests a growth mindset.

Adam: And now, notice what you are talking about in the “I deserve it.” That's inherently fixed. “I'm so wonderful that I deserve it,” or “I have never been anything but an A student, so I deserve it.” The “earned it” mindset, on the other hand, that's inherently a growth mindset. “I did the work, so I have earned this grade.”

Adam: Now if you come to your professors and you tell us, “I worked hard, I deserve a better grade” - when you say that word “deserve,” our first questions are going to be “Okay. How did you work? How did you split up your time? What did you do?” And this is hard to understand. A lot of students hate hearing this, but stressing out and working hard are two completely different things. Stressing out may feel like work, but if it doesn't actually get anything accomplished, it isn't work. It's just stressing out. We can't grade your stressing out. We can't see that. All we can see is what you gave us. We've talked about this in many previous episodes. This is sort of one of the ongoing themes of this podcast.

Adam: When you come to us and say, “But I deserve a better grade, I worked so hard, I stressed so much!” We sympathize. We get it, but it's time to learn a new way, and that way is: “Did I do work that was progress toward a goal? If so, then I have earned this.”

Adam: Now, it's interesting that this is what we're recording today, because in my Facebook memories, I literally - something I shared from an email I received from a student, where they said, “When I saw the zero on this assignment, I was so angry, because I had worked so hard on what I did turn in, but then I realized - I went back and looked at your requirements for the assignment, and I realized that I had left an entire piece of it unfinished. I'm used to being able to turn in partial work and get partial credit, and then I had to remind myself, I don't get to be angry with Dr. Sanford, because he made it clear at the beginning of the work, unfinished work, incomplete work earns a zero. So now I know I need to pay attention and take care of all the parts of the assignment in order to get the grade I want. And now I know that just working hard and stressing out doesn't mean I've earned it.”

Dinur: Now when we receive assignments or tests, we don't and we can't judge them based on stress level, or on what students tell us their effort level was, right? A student tells me, “I worked so hard on this.” I might ask, “So are you telling me your classmates didn't work hard on this?” Because you're trying to set yourself up comparing yourself to your peers, but you don't know what everyone else did. We don't know what everyone else did. We assume that some did it stress-free; some did it really, really stressed; and most people were somewhere between both extremes.

Dinur: We can't give a grade based on that. We can only evaluate what you actually turn in to us. So, that should tell us that the grades that are given reflect the quality of the work submitted, and that's it. They don't tell us who you are. They just tell us: how well did you meet our standards for this project? How well did you understand the material that you were tested on?

Dinur: And recognize that when you say that you “deserve” a grade and you don't give us proof of why you deserve it - “Hey, you said I only got a B-minus because I was missing an entire paragraph. Here's where I was putting these ideas” - right? I missed something that was actually in there. And that means, okay, I've got to go back and give the points back. But if I don't have proof of something like that, I can't raise a grade like that.

Dinur: I know Adam can't. And I'm guessing pretty much any professor you have can't, because we need that evidence. We need that proof. And so one thing Adam and I really encourage you all is to earn higher grades by changing what your work habits are. We've done episodes about studying in groups, using flash cards, engaging with your material in multiple ways, so that the material sinks in. And a way of thinking about that is

by putting that effort in, you're getting a better return on your investment, and your investment is the effort and that stress level. Hopefully it's going to be less stress, more effort, and a higher return on investment.

Adam: So one of the places that we see this kind of request or demand a lot from students, you know, "this is not a fair grade, I only got a C," is in grade-begging emails where the student writes us an email and says, "My exam, I only got a C and I totally deserved an A, because I'm an A student." But there's nothing in that email saying why you deserve a better grade. It's just "I'm an A student, therefore give me an A."

Adam: And the thing is, as Dinur just said, if you don't provide us some concrete reason to change your grade, like, "Hey, you said that I didn't have a thesis statement, but here it is," or "Hey, you said I didn't do the last half of the exam, but I just don't see any grade marks on it. It just wasn't counted as part of my exam," okay. Bring our attention to those mistakes that we made. We're more than happy to fix them.

Adam: But when we get an email that says, "I'm an A student, how dare you give me a C!" and that's it? We're probably just not even going to respond to that email. Grade-begging doesn't work. It also tells us that you feel entitled to good grades regardless of the quality of your work. That may have worked in high school, but it will not work in college. Now, I'm sure that Dinur can talk about some grade-begging emails he's had to do. So I don't want to talk about too specific, but you know, if you want to - go ahead.

Dinur: Oh, yeah. I remember a recent semester that I was teaching, I got a grade-begging email in all-caps, saying "GRADE ROUNDING HELP" and that was it. It was a student who was borderline between two grade steps. I don't remember what those grades were, but I got that email, and if I remember correctly, I think they'd earned the benefit of the doubt with the work that they did. So I'd bumped them up. I refused to answer that email. And it was a few days between when I had submitted grades and grades being posted, but I don't want to dignify that kind of an email with a response, because honestly, it comes off as pathetic. It's sad. And on one level I felt bad for the student for not telling them, "Hey, you can rely on, you're getting this grade." But on the other hand, I also really don't want to reward that kind of behavior. And if I tell them, "Oh yeah, you've got the higher grade," they might think that it was them begging for me to help by rounding up the grade that earned them this. And I don't want to reward that kind of behavior.

Adam: Now, I'm fine with getting a grade email that says, "Hey, you know what, you told me that my grade was going to be this, and it showed up as that." So, last semester I was filing all of my grades, and a student had come in about a week before classes were over and said, "So once I finish this last assignment, I will have an A-minus. Right?"

Adam: And I looked at it, I said, "Yep, you will."

Adam: And he said, "Well, 'cause I'm not getting credit for this one thing. You know, this one group of assignments." And I looked in my grade book, and sure enough, there was a typo in the grade book that was screwing up the Excel calculation. I'm all, "Let me fix that. Yes, you absolutely will have an A-minus."

Adam: Well, a week later I'm filing grades. Do I remember that I'd had this conversation? Of course not. Did my grade book revert back to the error? Yes. Because I clicked and dragged, like an idiot. And then I got an email from him saying, "Hey, I thought that I was getting an A-minus? Uh, help?"

Adam: And I'm like, "Oh, hell," you know? And I went back and I looked, and sure enough, it was the same mistake. So I fixed it, updated his grade. And because he had been polite to me, I sent him an email saying "My bad, sorry about that. It's fixed. You should see it by tomorrow at the Registrar." Not a problem. This is not

a problem. What is a problem is an email that says "Change my grade because I'm a better student than that," and that's it. To Dinur, it comes off as pathetic. To me, it comes off as hostile. It comes off as demanding, and it comes off as a toddler throwing a tantrum. I don't reward tantrums, and neither do your other professors.

Adam: So, the thing is, a lot of students also get very upset when I call them out on this. And so, we should probably talk about where it comes from. Now, in a recent episode, we talked about the self-esteem movement, where students - where kids - were told by their parents and by their schools that anything bad that had happened would be fixed by the parent or by the school, that the child was never at fault, that they never had to deal with mistakes. And the self-esteem movement also said, "Praise your kid to the skies!" And that creates the fixed mindset. That is where helicopter parenting comes from.

Adam: It also comes, in part, from grade inflation where - professors these days, a lot of us are part-timers, and we live from term to term, and part of getting rehired often depends on what kind of reviews we get from students. And we may, completely unconsciously, bump those grades up, because we want to keep in the good graces of students. But that sends a message to the student that they're doing better than they actually are.

Adam: And then of course going back to all of this, the labeling that comes out of the self-esteem movement and the helicopter parenting thing, these formation of identities that aren't based on work and effort but on something that's considered inherent, like "I'm an A student, I'm gifted, I'm talented, I'm smart" - these are all things that contribute to believing in being entitled to something because of who you are or what you are, and not because of what you did or didn't do.

Adam: And so, it's important, students, to look for this tendency in yourself. It places the power outside of you. It's something you don't have control over. Either you're smart, or you're not - and that's not actually how the world works. You actually work hard, or you don't.

Adam: Now, if you have planned on skating through college on your smarts, that may have worked in high school, but again, it's not going to work in college. But it can be a real blow when you figure out that your self-identified label, that the label you were given because of your perfect 4.0 in your senior year of high school, is not actually going to apply now. Because what you are now is based on what you've done, not on inherent qualities, and that's really tough. I mean Dinur actually spent more time in grad school working, probably, on identity than I did, but I've done a lot of work on it since, in terms of studying it and understanding it, partly because of this podcast.

Dinur: And if you're a student and you come into a class with that belief, "I'm an A student, I don't get anything less than an A," and you get that first test back, that first paper back, and it's a B-minus -

Adam: Or a C...

Dinur: Right - the horror! Well, your first reaction is, "Well, no, this grade is wrong." Right? You've started feeling really defensive, because that grade isn't who you are.

Dinur: Now, you're partially correct. Your grades are not who you are. But you take it personally. Your identity has been derailed, right? All of a sudden there's someone challenging this idea that you're always an A student. That happens. To phrase it vulgarly, your confidence goes to shit. It just goes away.

Dinur: If that happens, it's really hard to be motivated to put the effort into improve. That can start a bad slump, because you feel like no matter what you do, now, because of this one test or this one paper, you won't be viewed as "good enough" to earn those good labels - that somehow this one test now means you're not smart, or this one paper means you'll never get an A in your life, right? You're worried that this means without the good labels constantly being given to you, that you aren't good or talented or smart, and therefore you feel like you are a lesser person. You're not as good as you thought you were.

Dinur: But, to bring in a lesson from the world of sports, "hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard." You could be talented at anything. You could be a talented artist, musician, writer, athlete. But if you're not putting in that time and that effort to work on your craft, you're never going to improve. And so a better mentality is: how can I be a better artist, a better writer, better musician, better athlete, better student today than I was yesterday? Right? So it's that idea of constant improvement and constant growth. And this should hopefully start showing you that the idea of effort mattering really shines through, because you can overcome someone else's judgment if you're willing to put the effort needed into improving.

Adam: And here's the other thing about that effort stuff. When you know that you passed a test because you put in the work, the feeling is totally different than when you cross your fingers and hope that you passed the test because you're "an A student," and then you passed it. In that instance - when you pass it because you just kept hoping that being an "A student" would allow you to pass the test - the feeling is almost like, whew, okay, good. I dodged another bullet. I can still make people believe that I'm that smart. Right.

Dinur: I fooled them again.

Adam: "I fooled them again," yeah. This is very much an imposter syndrome problem, okay? And a lot of people with fixed mindsets and identities based not on achievement, but on inherent qualities they think they have feel like imposters. They feel like, "Okay, I managed to do it this time, but what about next time?" The people who think of themselves as straight -A students are often the most stressed people I've ever met.

Adam: But the people who finish that paper or finish that test come out of it thinking, "I did the best I could. I know I worked hard. I can remember all the work I put into it. I didn't just skate by," and then they get back their test and they get their A or their B that they were hoping for. Then it's not, "Oh good. I fooled them again." It's more, "yes, look at that. I did it!" The feeling is totally different when you shift from, "I'm an A student, so if I don't get an A, I'm a failure," to "I'm a student who works hard. A B will be great, an A would be better - but I'm going for that B, I'm going to make sure I get that B, by working my butt off." And the fact is you feel better with effort-based achievement than you will ever feel with identity-based achievement. The feeling is night and day, and I speak as someone who has done both.

Adam: Now, Dinur and I have had experiences with this with a lot of our students, and so we're just going to talk about a few of them. I've mentioned the student who demanded an A from the professor when I gave them a C, when they had done half a page for each essay question in their bluebook instead of a full page for each essay question in their bluebook. They were acting based on a label that they were carrying around with them: "A student, I am an A student, I am an A student."

Adam: If you are thinking this way, it's time to stop. That label is tricking you. That label is hamstringing you. That label is saying, "If you don't get A's, you're not worth anything," and that is patently not true. That student nearly had a nervous breakdown when they were told, "No, you're getting an F on this assignment," because that is what my managing professor, Austin Turk, gave her. He put an F on the bluebook, and the student

nearly fell apart right there in his office, and then stormed out. She was going to appeal. She never did, because she realized appealing wouldn't fix anything.

Dinur: I know one of the - either last semester or the semester before, I had a student who was not happy with the grade they received on a term paper. They'd earned a B-minus, and within five minutes of me returning the papers, they came up to me demanding to get a grade appeal, which means that there's no way they could have looked through and thought about any of the feedback that was written on that paper.

And so, I looked at them and I said, "Okay, why do you deserve this higher grade? What have you done?"

And they looked and they said, "This grade is just way too low."

And I said, "Okay, if you want to appeal the grade, you've got to put in writing what I need to look for, because that lets me know what to look for. And I can either judge whether you said what you said, or whether it's just not there to my liking."

And they said, "But I just want to appeal!"

And I said, "If you want me to regrade your paper, your grade can go one of three ways. One way is, the grade stays the same - I think that the grade reflects the overall quality of the work. The second way is the way you really want it to go - and I'll say, 'You know what, I shortchanged your grade. You deserve a step or two or more higher.' But the third way is the one you really don't want to happen, where I say, 'Hey, I found some new mistakes that I didn't penalize that first time through, and that might lower your grade,' and that means that there is a two-in-three chance that that regrade is not going to go the way you want it to. So are you 100% sure that you'd like me to regrade, or would you like to give me a concrete thing to look for and to assess whether I should change the grade or not?"

Adam: I had a student, when I first instituted standards-based grading, who flunked every quiz - every single quiz - and then, near the end of the semester they grieved, not their grades, but the grading system, because "they were an A student and these quizzes made it impossible for them to get an A." They went all the way up to a faculty committee. Faculty committee said, "Nope, sorry, grading system is fair. And the fact that you bombed it on all the exams tells us that if he had given traditional exams, you would have bombed those too. So then what would you be complaining about?" And again, this was a student who was clinging to the label, "A student. I am an A student."

Adam: I have to tell you, folks, if you're holding onto that label of "I am an A student," you've got to let it go now. It is one of the worst things you can do to yourself. I did it to myself, back when I was a student. And it was horrible, and it was knocked right out from under me, my first semester in upper-division. So I had come into UC Riverside, which is where both Dinur and I did our Masters' and PhDs, but I also did my upper-division undergrad there.

Adam: And I remember, I think I've actually talked about this in a previous episode, I turned in a paper about two weeks early and I got an A-minus on it. And that was crushing for me, because that meant that not only could I not get a 4.0 that semester - because that meant that A-minus was a significant part of the grade. And as it turned out, I got an A-minus in the class - but it also meant I could never achieve a 4.0. It was simply not going to be possible. My cumulative GPA would always have an A-minus sitting in there, dragging it down from 4.0.

Adam: And I was crushed for about two weeks. I remember I was crying in the honors lounge, and then one of the other honors kids sat down next to me and said, "What's wrong?" And I said, "I will never get a 4.0! I got an A-minus on this paper, and I'm never going to get a 4.0!" and they said, "Man, nobody cares after you graduate. Nobody's going to care whether you got a 4.0 or 3.98 or a 3.6 or a 2.9. They're not going to stamp it on your degree." And that was the first time I had heard that GPA did not matter once you were out of school. Now I planned to go back and go to grad school, but then I started asking the professors that I trusted, "What do you do if someone turns in a graduate school application and they don't have a 4.0?"

Adam: They said, "There's a lot of other things we look at. That's not the only thing we look at." But it took me about two weeks to really work through, "Why am I clinging to this 4.0, perfect A student?" And even today, if I don't do something really, really well, if I get any negative comments or negative critique, I still have to work through that - because I was trained for so many years to believe that it's an identity thing, not a work thing.

Dinur: And for the record, for the student that I mentioned complaining about that paper, they never filed an appeal. So that grade remained unchanged, because they didn't give me a reason to raise it, but they also didn't give me a reason to lower it. So, fairest thing to do is keep it the same way. But...

Adam: And teachers, that might be something to do, too, is when they, when they do appeal or when they demand to appeal, if they haven't written an appeal, say, "Okay, just be aware, when you appeal. It could go up, but it could stay the same, and it could go down. Be aware of that. That is something that could happen." Make it part of your policy.

Dinur: Yeah. And if you're making it part of your policy, put it on the syllabus, so that it's there from day one. Years ago I had kind of a similar situation, in a class I was a teaching assistant for, I had an older student, I think there were a good 10-15 years older than me, and that meant that they were also older than their peers. And for this class, they had to write a paper that was between six and 10 pages, applying some criminology theories or some concepts from juvenile delinquency to a movie. And I told them, "Please don't give me an overview of this movie, because I know it's good. I'm the one who suggested it to the professor. I thought it'd be a fun movie to work with for this class. I really need to see those concepts." And the professor at the time was really demanding that they make at least six pages.

Dinur: So this student gives me a four page paper, which could have pretty much been an IMDB synopsis of the movie. Literally did not follow any of the instructions. They didn't give me the concepts that I'd asked my students to write about, and that we had spent time in classes discussing when we worked on their papers.

Dinur: They didn't hit the minimum page length, and I was kind of frustrated at that. So I think I assigned a 66%. And the student was very upset with me going, "Well, how dare you!" And I said, "You gave me two thirds of the minimum length due. I was nice and I gave you two thirds of the points." And I figured that she would probably appeal this grade. So I told the professor, "Hey, here's the paper that I read. This is what I assigned. And he tells me, I think you were really generous with that."

Adam: Yup. Just like Turk with the one student with the in-class essay exam. He got mad at me. He said, "Adam, don't ever let me catch you inflating a student's grade again." And I'm all, "Yes, sir." You know, I was standing in the doorway of his office and like, "okay, I won't do that." So now I grade pretty stringent, because I don't need his ghost haunting me. *laughs*

Dinur: Right. So sure enough, the student appeals to the professor, and the professor calls both of us in, similar to what happened to Adam with Dr. Turk. And he goes, "Is this the grade you gave?"

Dinur: And I go, "yeah."

Dinur: He goes, "I would have given this no higher than a 50." And this student was in shock. And he goes, "Look, if you were told that you need to write six pages because I said so, and you were told that you needed to work these juvenile delinquency theories because it's in our rubric, and it's been discussed both in lecture and in discussion sections, then why are you giving us this to grade? And why are you getting this mad at us?" And he lowered that grade. He wasn't happy with that.

Dinur: I know she was upset. I was the softie. I told her she could try and make it up to get it to at least passing by the time the course was over, okay? But I know that a lot of people won't do that because, for us, if we're rereading a paper a second or third time because it didn't follow directions the first time, it's frustrating. And I know that she stood out. In that sense, she was an outlier, because my other students all followed directions, and none got anywhere near that low if they were at six to 10 pages and were talking about stuff from the class.

Adam: And then I also had an older, nontraditional student, and they expected to get a C, apparently, for simply showing up to class. And they got, I think, a 62%, which was definitely a failing grade, and I gave them a D with it. And they grieved it when they were told they had not done enough work to get any higher grade. And they showed up in my office, and they insisted that being in the room meant they deserved a C - that that was enough to get a C.

Adam: And I said, "Show me in the syllabus where it says that."

Adam: And they said, "I don't care what your syllabus says. I was there and I deserve a C."

Adam: And I said, "Well, according to my syllabus, attendance counts for nothing, and under the laws of the state, I'm not allowed to give you a grade based on attendance."

Adam: "Well, that's not fair!"

Adam: And then I said, "Look, if I raised your grade, based on what you're saying, that would not be fair to the other students."

Adam: "Well, I don't care about them. I only care about me."

Adam: Okay. Just a note: don't be that student. Don't be that student.

Adam: Now, there were also additional issues with that student, because then they found out what my car looked like, and threatened to tell their son about it. And then I had police escort back and forth, until they either graduated or left school. I don't know which one they did. But I was frightened of that student, because they were very serious that if I didn't give them a passing grade, they were going to make me pay for it. Don't be that student, okay?

Dinur: And notice, Adam didn't change that student's grade just because of the hostility, right? Quite the opposite. That hostility, those threats? Those tell us that you don't have a strong case. You're not showing us why you've earned a grade. And that just says, okay, without that proof, why would we change the grade?

Dinur: Now, some of the ways teachers can use this is to recognize that when students are sending us these grade-begging emails, or they're visibly upset, or just generally they're upset about a grade that they've received - well, that ties into students wrapping up their personal identities in their grades. And they assume that we see them differently, based on the grades they've earned.

Dinur: So Adam and I really suggest being open about what grades mean. And we've done an episode on that - that grades mean something very different at the college level than they do at the high school level. And sometimes, it helps to hear that your grades are not who you are. They are merely a reflection of how well you met the standard for completing a specific project, paper, at one point in time, or how comfortable you were with material the one time it got tested.

Adam: And the second thing you can do is set up a grade appeal process. Put it in your syllabus and make it, students have to appeal in writing, in email and they have to explain why their grade was not correct and what we missed, ideally using the rubric. So you should provide the rubrics to your students.

Adam: And also, I set a time limit. I call it the 24/7 rule. You've got to wait 24 hours before you can send me an email, 'cause I'll delete anything you send me before that, because I don't want to deal with your initial anger and upset - and you know, nobody does, students. So, wait 24 hours. And then, within seven days after that, you must file your appeal. If you don't file your appeal within those seven days, then it's done, and the grade is set in stone. So I will not - so I tell my students, "If you got a grade in week three, I will not discuss it in week 13."

Dinur: And Adam just mentioned rubrics. To the extent that you're able to, show your students how they're going to be evaluated. So when I tell my students, "You're writing a term paper for me," I make that rubric very clear and the points suggest what parts I'm emphasizing.

Dinur: So if I tell them "your thesis statement is worth 30% of this paper, make sure it's clear and lets me know where this paper's going," then that means that students have to pay attention to that. But it's a way of being transparent, saying, "here are my expectations and this is really what I'm looking for." And that helps students understand what they're actually being evaluated on. None of my categories are "be stressed out about this."

Adam: Right, and none of them are "be the kind of person who deserves this."

Dinur: Exactly. So yeah. So you want to be transparent, you want to help students understand what they're being evaluated on, and that is how well they're meeting your criteria for passing an assignment.

Adam: So if it's a big project, make sure that you cut it up into some steps. Have some smaller steps that they're evaluated on. So if you have a research paper, bring in drafts. If you have a research paper, you might say, "We're going to start out with how to build your argument. You're going to get graded on that first, and then we're going to talk about finding your sources and you'll do an annotated bibliography," so that each step, students have to bring in their notes, or their data, or their draft, or their outline, so that you can identify these potential problems on the lower-stakes, earlier assignments. Don't leave it until the high-stakes final assignment or paper.

Adam: Too many professors still assign "three exams and a paper" and they don't accept any drafts or anything. You're just expected to turn in this perfect paper at the end of the semester. That's a great way to shoot your student's grade in the foot. Most of them are going to write it at the end of the semester right before it's due, if you don't make them turn in pieces of it.

Adam: I had a student come to my office hours just yesterday, and she said, "what if all I want to do is the research paper?"

Adam: I'm all, "Too bad. If you want to do the research paper, you have to do the five assignments that come before it."

Adam: "Well, I don't want to do those."

Adam: "Well, then, you don't get to do a research paper."

Adam: "But I want to do a research paper."

Adam: "Fine. Then you also want to do the workshop, the annotated bib, the second workshop, the lit review, the third workshop and the paper. That's how it works."

Adam: And if students respond to the feedback, then help them earn a higher grade with it. It's visible, tangible effort that they're making. If you've critiqued them on their annotated bibliography, because nothing is formatted correctly in their citations, and they fix their citations, you should acknowledge that. Say, "I love how you've improved this. I'm glad that you took a look at the formatting thing that I sent you about how our style works, so that you've done it correctly."

Adam: And if they don't respond to the feedback, they haven't earned a higher grade. This is a way to reinforce that grades are not deserved. They are not given. They are earned.

Dinur: And I know that when I have smaller assignments due before a bigger project, I tend to grade the smaller parts a lot more harshly, because a harsh grade on a smaller assignment can often kind of spark a much better final project. And I'm able to grade those final projects that are worth 25 or 30 percent a lot more leniently, because I can see - Adam just mentioned, that visible, tangible effort. I can see that 'cause I can say, "Hey, I remember on this assignment you didn't really have much of a thesis, or you didn't bring in any sources, but I can see you really worked hard and that deserves - you did great work with this. This is a B-plus. It might be an A-minus."

Dinur: As counterintuitive as it sounds, sometimes the harsher grade on something that's worth 5% or less than the overall grade, can lead to a much higher overall grade because of that effort that's put in. So we're not giving a low grade to try and traumatize a student. But the low grade means "You didn't meet the standard we set," and if it's low-stakes, it gives you a chance to correct that mistake before it can snowball and turn into a big problem with the overall grade.

Adam: Now, students, following on from that, here's some things that you can do. And the first one is, bring your assignments in while you're working on them. Even if your teacher has not yet set it up where you've got to bring in a rough draft of the paper, make an appointment with them, or come in during office hours, and go over an in-progress draft - because this shows us that you care about the assignment and you care about learning, and that's a good, good, good message to send.

Adam: I had a student come in once, and they were completely confused because the annotated bibliography is "list sources and tell me why they are going to help you," and then the lit review is "tie together the shared ideas across your sources." She was completely confused. "What do you mean shared ideas? I've never heard

that before. I have no idea what you're talking about. Isn't every source, like, existing on its own?" And so I took her through an exercise that is "how you identify the shared ideas across your different sources." And after we did that, she looked so happy, she was so relieved. She was like, "I thought I was stupid."

Adam: I'm all, "No, you just - this is a tool that you didn't understand yet. It's okay to come in and ask for help. That's not a problem."

Adam: Students, bring things in, ask us for help, ask us for feedback. Sometimes there may be a tool we assumed you knew and when you come in and say, "I don't know how to figure out where the shared ideas are," we go, "Oh, you know what? That should be something I include in the workshops. I'll make sure I do that from now on. Thank you. I'll send out an email, but let me walk you through that." So you're helping us, too.

Dinur: And you're also sending us the message that you value our feedback, because we assume that if you're taking the time to meet with us to get feedback, that you're going to take what we said into consideration and you'll work with it.

Dinur: And that leads us into the idea of when you receive feedback on your earlier drafts, whether they're formal or you've made an informal appointment during office hours, look over what we say, work with it, because we are not trying to lower your grade. We're trying to help you earn the highest grade possible. If you can understand the feedback as, "Hey, this is missing and if I correct this, this will lead me to a higher grade," then you're at least starting to learn the idea of putting in some effort and earning the grade, as opposed to assuming that we're going to give you a grade just based on who you say you are.

Dinur: We have hundreds of students each term. If all of them were A students, because they're all spectacular, then that means that they should all be able to show us this in one way or another. Well, it's not everyone does this. Do I mean they're all bad? No, it just means it should hopefully be showing you and hopefully this is something that will stick: the grades you earn reflect how well you did an assignment, a project, or a test at one point in time. It tells us nothing about who you are. And we don't remember the grades you earned after we filed those final grades, because one, way more of you than there are of us, and two, it's not part of - at least for Adam and for myself, and we're assuming for others - your grades don't tell us who you are. They just tell us how well you did in our class one semester or one quarter.

Adam: And the thing about that feedback, too - when we write that stuff on your paper, on your project, on your essay exam, we are not doing it to hurt your feelings. We are not doing it to say, "Oh, you suck." But we are saying, "Hey look, the assignment guidelines called for a thesis here and we don't see one," or, "The assignment guidelines say you've got to make sure that you proofread, but you keep misspelling this word over and over again. I think this might be a word you want to put on your 'check every time' list."

Adam: This is intended to help you. It may feel like we are picking on you, but we're not. We are saying, "Look, we see these four areas for improvement. Do these things, turn it back in, and you'll do better." Or, if the professor doesn't allow you to turn it back in, "Know that these are things that you have problems with. The next time you do a paper in this class or in any other class, check for them. Make sure that you fix them." We're identifying a problem that is happening now. That doesn't mean you have to keep repeating it, and it doesn't mean you need to feel bad about the feedback that you're getting.

Adam: One way to do this is to look over the grading rubrics. When we give you feedback, look at the rubric, because that'll tell you what we're looking for and what we see missing or not done well. And if you look at the grading rubric, like Dinur said, none of it is going to say "be an A student" or "stress out 15 minutes a day" or

“rip your hair out by the roots.” None of that is on the rubric! But it might have “proofread your work and make sure that everything is spelled correctly.” And if we keep seeing the “their, there, they’re” mistake where you’re not using the correct word, or where we see you using -

Dinur: “Two, too, to.”

Adam: “Two, too, and to,” or where we see you using phrases like “he discriminated her.” In writing, that doesn’t work. You’ve got to say “discriminated against”. But if you don’t know that you’re making these mistakes, how are you ever going to improve? Our job is to say, “Look, we see these mistakes. We’re pointing them out to you. They are a problem with this area of the rubric. Go fix them and you’ll do better.”

Dinur: And the advice we’re giving might sound a little counterintuitive when we talk about grading lower-stakes assignments more stringently, or when Adam says, “well, what if your professor doesn’t accept redos? But to look for other classes” - we’re effectively suggesting that part of the growth could be taking an immediate loss, or a short term loss, and turning in into a long term gain or a long term win. Right? If you get that grade that you didn’t like, but it’s a quiz that’s worth 5% or less than that on your overall grade, and now you say, “Okay, I bombed this quiz, but I’m going to remember these terms or these ideas, and now when they show up on my midterm exam, I’m going to really be comfortable working with them,” well, that’s a really good thing. You’ve grown. You’ve taken that feedback that, “Hey, you’ve got to clear yourself up on these ideas, these concepts, whatever it is,” and you’ve taken that and now you’re applying it to a higher stakes assignment or test.

Adam: You’re reminding me of when I was in junior high, and I was in seventh grade, and I won the school spelling bee. And then I got to go to the district spelling bee, and I won that too. And then I got to go to the county spelling bee, and I bombed it. To this day, I remember the word that kicked me out of the running: “mnemonic.” I did not know that word. I had never heard it before. I had never read it before.

Adam: But do I remember how to spell “mnemonic” today? Oh, yeah. You better believe it. And did it make me realize that I had to know the words, that I needed to learn the words, that I couldn’t just look at a list and assume that I would know them? Yes. So even though it was a short term loss, and embarrassing to lose, it’s something I’ve carried forward with me into the rest of my life where, “All right, I blew it this time. That doesn’t mean I can’t learn from it.”

Dinur: And I guess the last reminder that we would have is, it’s your work that’s evaluated. It’s not you - who you are as a person; it’s not your stress level. So if you show us, as your teachers, a commitment to improving through your consistent effort, then you’re going to see that the grades you earn are going to be on the rise. So the more effort you put in, the more results should follow.

Adam: So that’s what we have for you in Episode 54. 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 55, when Adam and I talk about how to handle mistakes.

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

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

Dinur: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier.

Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!