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Answer Sheet

Teacher spends two days as a student and is shocked at what she learns



By **Valerie Strauss** October 24

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A student takes notes at Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington D.C. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

Do teachers really know what students go through? To find out, one teacher followed two students for two days and was amazed at what she found. Her report is in following post, which appeared on the blog of Grant Wiggins, the co-author of [“Understanding by Design”](#) and the author of [“Educative Assessment”](#) and numerous articles on

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education. A high school teacher for 14 years, he is now the president of Authentic Education, in Hopewell, New Jersey, which provides professional development and other services to schools aimed at improving student learning. You can read more about him and his work at [the AE site](#).

Wiggins initially posted the piece without revealing the author. But the post became popular on his blog and he decided to write a [followup piece](#) revealing that the author was his daughter, Alexis Wiggins, a 15-year teaching veteran now working in a private American International School overseas. Wiggins noted in his follow-up that his daughter's experiences mirrored his own and aligned well with the the responses on surveys that his organization gives to students.

By Alexis Wiggins

I have made a terrible mistake.

I waited 14 years to do something that I should have done my first year of teaching: shadow a student for a day. It was so eye-opening that I wish I could go back to every class of students I ever had right now

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and change a minimum of ten things – the layout, the lesson plan, the checks for understanding. Most of it!

This is the first year I am working in a school but not teaching my own classes; I am the High School Learning Coach, a new position for the school this year. My job is to work with teachers and administrators to improve student learning outcomes.

As part of getting my feet wet, my principal suggested I “be” a student for two days: I was to shadow and complete all the work of a 10th grade student on one day and to do the same for a 12th grade student on another day. My task was to do everything the student was supposed to do: if there was lecture or notes on the board, I copied them as fast I could into my notebook. If there was a Chemistry lab, I did it with my host student. If there was a test, I took it (I passed the Spanish one, but I am certain I failed the business one).

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My class schedules for the day

(Note: we have a block schedule; not all classes

meet each day):

The schedule that day for the 10th grade student:

7:45 – 9:15: Geometry

9:30 – 10:55: Spanish II

10:55 – 11:40: Lunch

11:45 – 1:10: World History

1:25 – 2:45: Integrated Science

The schedule that day for the 12th grade student:

7:45 – 9:15: Math

9:30 – 10:55: Chemistry

10:55 – 11:40: Lunch

11:45 – 1:10: English

1:25 – 2:45: Business

Key Takeaway #1

Students sit all day, and sitting is exhausting.

I could not believe how tired I was after the first day. I literally sat down the entire day, except for walking to and from classes. We forget as teachers, because we are on our feet a lot – in front of the board, pacing as we speak, circling around the room to check on student work, sitting, standing, kneeling down to chat with a student as she works through a difficult problem...we move a lot.

But students move almost never. And never is exhausting. In every class for four long blocks, the expectation was for us to come in, take our seats, and sit down for the duration of the time. By the end of the day, I could not stop yawning and I was desperate to move or stretch. I couldn't believe how alert my host student was, because it took a lot of conscious effort for me not to get up and start doing jumping jacks in the middle of Science just to keep my mind and body from slipping into oblivion after so many hours of sitting passively.

I was drained, and not in a good, long, productive-day kind of way. No, it was that icky, lethargic tired feeling. I had planned to go back to my office and jot down some initial notes on the day, but I was so

drained I couldn't do anything that involved mental effort (so instead I watched TV) and I was in bed by 8:30.

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If I could go back and change my classes now, I would immediately change the following three things:

- mandatory stretch halfway through the class
- put a Nerf basketball hoop on the back of my door and encourage kids to play in the first and final minutes of class
- build in a hands-on, move-around activity into every single class day. Yes, we would sacrifice some content to do this – that's fine. I was so tired by the end of the day, I wasn't absorbing most of the content, so I am not sure my previous method of making kids sit through hour-long, sit-down discussions of the texts was all that effective.

Key Takeaway #2

High school students are sitting passively and listening during approximately 90 percent of their classes.

Obviously I was only shadowing for two days, but in follow-up interviews with both of my host students, they assured me that the classes I experienced were fairly typical.

In eight periods of high school classes, my host students rarely spoke. Sometimes it was because the teacher was lecturing; sometimes it was because another student was presenting; sometimes it was because another student was called to the board to solve a difficult equation; and sometimes it was because the period was spent taking a test. So, I don't mean to imply critically that only the teachers droned on while students just sat and took notes. But still, hand in hand with takeaway #1 is this idea that most of the students' day was spent passively absorbing information.

It was not just the sitting that was draining but that so much of the day was spent absorbing information but not often grappling with it.

I asked my tenth-grade host, Cindy, if she felt like she made important contributions to class or if, when she was absent, the class missed out on the benefit of her knowledge or contributions, and she laughed and said no.

I was struck by this takeaway in particular because it made me realize how little autonomy students have, how little of their learning they are directing or choosing. I felt especially bad about opportunities I had missed in the past in this regard.

If I could go back and change my classes now, I would immediately:

- Offer brief, blitzkrieg-like mini-lessons with engaging, assessment-for-learning-type activities following directly on their heels (e.g. a ten-minute lecture on Whitman's life and poetry, followed by small-group work in which teams scour new poems of his for the very themes and notions expressed in the lecture, and then share out or perform some of them to the whole group while everyone takes notes on the findings.)
- set an egg timer every time I get up to talk and all eyes are on me. When the timer goes off, I am done. End of story. I can go on and on. I love to hear myself talk. I often cannot shut up. This is not really conducive to my students' learning, however much I might enjoy it.
- Ask every class to start with students' Essential Questions or just general questions born of

confusion from the previous night's reading or the previous class's discussion. I would ask them to come in to class and write them all on the board, and then, as a group, ask them to choose which one we start with and which ones need to be addressed. This is my biggest regret right now – not starting every class this way. I am imagining all the misunderstandings, the engagement, the enthusiasm, the collaborative skills, and the autonomy we missed out on because I didn't begin every class with fifteen or twenty minutes of this.

Key takeaway #3

You feel a little bit like a nuisance all day long.

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I lost count of how many times we were told be quiet and pay attention. It's normal to do so – teachers have a set amount of time and we need to use it wisely. But in shadowing, throughout the day, you start to feel sorry for the students who are told over and over again to pay attention because you understand part of what they are reacting to is sitting and listening all day. It's really hard to do, and not something we ask adults to do day in and

out. Think back to a multi-day conference or long PD day you had and remember that feeling by the end of the day – that need to just disconnect, break free, go for a run, chat with a friend, or surf the web and catch up on emails. That is how students often feel in our classes, not because we are boring *per se* but because they have been sitting and listening most of the day already. They have had enough.

In addition, there was a good deal of sarcasm and snark directed at students and I recognized, uncomfortably, how much I myself have engaged in this kind of communication. I would become near apoplectic last year whenever a very challenging class of mine would take a test, and without fail, several students in a row would ask the same question about the test. Each time I would stop the class and address it so everyone could hear it.

Nevertheless, a few minutes later a student who had clearly been working his way through the test and not attentive to my announcement would ask the same question again. A few students would laugh along as I made a big show of rolling my eyes and drily stating, “OK, *once again*, let me explain...”

Of course it feels ridiculous to have to explain the same thing five times, but suddenly, when I was the

one taking the tests, I was stressed. I was anxious. I had questions. And if the person teaching answered those questions by rolling their eyes at me, I would never want to ask another question again. I feel a great deal more empathy for students after shadowing, and I realize that sarcasm, impatience, and annoyance are a way of creating a barrier between me and them. They do not help learning.

If I could go back and change my classes now, I would immediately:

- Dig deep into my personal experience as a parent where I found wells of patience and love I never knew I have, and call upon them more often when dealing with students who have questions. Questions are an invitation to know a student better and create a bond with that student. We can open the door wider or shut it forever, and we may not even realize we have shut it.
- I would make my personal goal of “no sarcasm” public and ask the students to hold me accountable for it. I could drop money into a jar for each slip and use it to treat the kids to pizza at the end of the year. In this way, I have both helped create a closer bond with them and shared a very real and personal example of

goal-setting for them to use a model in their own thinking about goals.

- I would structure every test or formal activity like the IB exams do – a five-minute reading period in which students can ask all their questions but no one can write until the reading period is finished. This is a simple solution I probably should have tried years ago that would head off a lot (thought, admittedly, not all) of the frustration I felt with constant, repetitive questions.

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I have a lot more respect and empathy for students after just one day of being one again. Teachers work hard, but I now think that conscientious students work harder. I worry about the messages we send them as they go to our classes and home to do our assigned work, and my hope is that more teachers who are able will try this shadowing and share their findings with each other and their administrations. This could lead to better “backwards design” from the student experience so that we have more engaged, alert, and balanced students sitting (or standing) in our classes.

[Here's the follow-up piece by Grant Wiggins.](#)

[GALLERY: Teachers before they were famous](#)

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Teachers before they were famous

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Phil Robertson | The patriarch of the popular reality show “Duck Dynasty” has a bachelor’s degree in physical education and a master’s in education, and taught for several years in Louisiana schools. According to his company’s bio, Robertson concluded [“his time and talents would be better spent in the woods.”](#) (AP/AP)

[View Photo Gallery —The “Duck Dynasty” patriarch, Britain’s Princess Diana and Jon Hamm of “Mad Men” fame: These notables and others spent time leading a classroom.](#)

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs
The Answer Sheet blog.
