
Three Lessons for Teachers from Grant Wiggins

by
Jay McTighe



Dr. Grant Wiggins (1950-2015)

The start of the new school year affords the perfect opportunity to reflect on the life and work of Grant Wiggins, an extraordinary educator who died unexpectedly in May 2015. Although I am an only child, I considered Grant my brother as well as an intellectual partner and best friend. I think of Grant every day and still miss him greatly.

While Grant is no longer with us, his spirit and ideas live on, and we can honor and celebrate his life's work by acting on the sage advice that he offered to educators over the years. As we prepare for a new school year, it's a good time to consider three of Grant's most important lessons for teachers.

Lesson #1 – Plan Backward from Authentic Performance.

Grant always reminded educators of the value of designing curriculum “backwards” with the end in mind. While the idea of using backward design to plan curriculum units and courses is certainly not new, the *Understanding by Design*® framework, which he co-created, underscores the value of this process for yielding clearly defined goals that promote understanding and transfer, appropriate and authentic assessments, tightly aligned lessons, purposeful teaching, and relevant and meaningful learning.

Grant pointed out that a backward designed curriculum means more than simply determining all of the content and standards you plan to cover and mapping out your day-to-day lessons. The idea is to plan backward from *worthy* goals—transferable concepts, principles, processes and essential questions that will enable students to apply their learning in meaningful and authentic ways. Grant knew that students need to understand “big ideas” in order to transfer their learning. Rote

learning of discrete facts and skills will simply *not* equip students to apply their learning to new situations.

More specifically, Grant advised us to think carefully about what students should *be able to do* with their learning. Rather than simply creating a long list of fragmented objectives, begin by identifying the authentic performances that will demonstrate student understanding and make learning relevant and meaningful. Just as athletic coaches, theater directors, or yearbook advisors plan backward from the game, the opening night of the play, or the due date to deliver the yearbook to the printer, so too can teachers plan their teaching backward from authentic performance tasks. Here are five examples of such tasks:

State Tour (Social Studies)

The state department of tourism has asked for your help in planning a four-day tour of [*your state*] for a group of visitors from other countries who speak English. Plan the tour to help the visitors understand [*your state's*] history, geography, and key economic assets.

You should prepare a map showing the itinerary. Include an explanation of why each site was included on the tour.

Your Best Grade (Mathematics)

Your math teacher will allow you to select the measure of central tendency (i.e., mean, median or mode) by which your quarterly math grade will be calculated. Review your grades for quizzes, tests, and homework to decide which measure of central tendency will be best for your situation. Write a note to your teacher explaining why you selected that method.

Book Review (English/Language Arts)

You have been asked to submit a book review for [title of book] to post on the Book Hooks website. This website is visited by thousands of kids to find out about books that they might like to read. Your review should summarize the basic plot, discuss what you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the book with evidence from the text, and give your recommendation as to whether you think others should read the book. Before you begin, check out book reviews by others students to determine what makes an effective review. (<http://www.spaghettibookclub.org/reviewer.php>)

School Improvement (responsible citizenship; creative problem solving)

You have an idea that you believe will make your school a better place, and you want to convince school leaders that they should act on your idea. Identify your audience (e.g., principal, members of the PTSA Board or Board of Education) and:

1. Describe your idea.
2. Explain why and how it will improve the school
3. Develop a plan for acting on your idea.

Your idea and plan can be communicated to your target audience in a letter, blog post or video.

Should drones be regulated? (research; argumentation)

After researching possible commercial and personal uses of drones and examining various opinions on the issue, develop your own position and develop a policy brief, editorial, or blog that argues for your position. Support your position with evidence from your research, while acknowledging competing views.

Grant likened authentic tasks to an athletic game. While the players need to have knowledge (the rules) and specific skills (e.g., dribbling), playing the game also involves conceptual understanding (game strategies) and transfer (applying skills and strategies to changing game situations). He noted that authentic tasks provide not only worthy learning targets, they bring relevance and purpose to learning which influences students' motivation. Think about it: how many players on sports teams would work hard in practice if there were no games to be played in their future? How many actors would diligently memorize their lines if they were not going to perform on stage before an audience? Students are more likely to be motivated to work on tasks with real-world relevance, a target audience and a worthwhile product or performance.

Then, with authentic performance in mind, teachers can plan backward by asking: What will students need to understand in order to effectively complete the task? What specific knowledge and skills will enable successful performance? The answers will focus and guide instruction.

Grant argued that such a “backward design” approach offers an effective alternative to a practice we see too often in our schools and classrooms—a focus on learning long lists of discrete knowledge and skill objectives without application and relevance. Moreover, teaching students to be able to apply their learning will help them develop the very capabilities needed for success in college and careers.

Lesson #2 – Feedback is Key to Successful Learning and Performance.

For years, Grant reminded educators that providing learners with helpful feedback was a key to successful learning and continuous improvement. His insights have been supported by research (e.g., from Dylan William, Robert Marzano and John Hattie) that strongly supports the idea that feedback is one of the highest-yielding strategies for enhancing achievement.

Yet Grant cautioned us against thinking that feedback takes the form of grades (B+) and exhortations (“try harder”). To be effective, Grant pointed out that feedback must meet several criteria:

- Feedback must be *timely*. Waiting two weeks or more to find out how you did on a test will not help your learning.
- Feedback must be *specific and descriptive*. Effective feedback highlights explicit strengths and weaknesses (e.g., “Your speech was well-organized and interesting to the audience. However, you were speaking too fast in the beginning and did not make eye contact with the audience. These are areas for you to work on for your next presentation.”).
- Feedback must be *understandable to the receiver*. Sometimes a teacher’s comment or the language in a rubric is lost on a student. Using student-friendly language can make feedback clearer and more comprehensible. For instance, instead of saying, “Document your reasoning process,” a teacher could say, “Show your work in a step-by-step manner so others can follow your thinking.”

Grant reminded us that providing learners with timely, clear, and specific feedback is necessary but insufficient. Feedback is provided *so* that one can make adjustments for improvement. Feedback without adjustment is like eating without digestion. Feedback only makes a difference when students use it. Thus, teachers should provide opportunities for students to self-adjust, to refine their thinking, practice skills, and revise their rough drafts.

He suggested a straightforward test for feedback: Can the learner tell from the given feedback what he or she has done well and what could be done next time to improve? Do they understand specifically what they need to practice or the revisions they need to make? If not, then the feedback is not yet specific enough or understandable to the learner.

Grant recommended that teachers use feedback reciprocally—they should not only offer feedback to learners; they should seek and use feedback *from* learners and others to improve their teaching. Here are four ways that teachers can obtain helpful feedback to enhance their own practice:

1. *Ask students*. Periodically, teachers can elicit student feedback using “exit cards” or questionnaires. Here are a few sample prompts: *What do you really*

understand about ___? What questions do you have? When were you most engaged? ... least engaged? What is working for you? What could I do to help?

2. *Ask colleagues.* It is easy for busy educators to get too close to their work. Having another set of eyes feed back to you what they see can be invaluable. Fellow teachers can review unit plans, examine the alignment between assessments and goals, and check essential questions and lesson plans to see if they are likely to engage students.
3. *Use formative assessments and act on their results.* Grant often used analogies to make a point. He likened formative assessment to tasting a meal while cooking it. Analogously, waiting until a unit test or final exam to discover that some students haven't "got it" is too late. Effective teachers, like successful cooks, sample learning along the way through formative assessments, and adjust the "ingredients" of their teaching based on results.
4. *Regularly analyze student work.* By closely examining the work that students produce on major assignments and assessments, teachers gain valuable insights about student strengths as well as skill deficiencies and misunderstandings. Grant encouraged teachers to analyze student work in teams, whenever possible. Just as football coaches review game film together and then plan next week's practices, teachers gain insight into needed curriculum and instructional adjustments based on results revealed by the work of students.

Lesson #3 – Empathize with the learner.

Grant thought deeply about the craft of teaching and cautioned teachers, especially experienced ones, about succumbing to what he called the Expert Blind Spot. He pointed out that "what is obvious to us is rarely obvious to a novice—and was once not obvious to us either, but we have forgotten our former views and struggles." He reminded us of the value of being sensitive to learners who do not have our expertise (and sometimes not even an interest) in the subject matter that we know so well. He noted that, "experts frequently find it difficult to have *empathy* for the novice, even when they try. That's why teaching is hard, especially for the expert in the field. Expressed positively, we must strive unendingly as educators to be empathetic with the learner's conceptual struggles if we are to succeed."

One of the ways Grant encouraged teachers to develop empathy for students is to "shadow" a student for a day and reflect on the experience. Recently, an experienced

high school teacher took his suggestion and described what it was like to walk in the shoes of students. Her account, summarized in a blog post, serves as a sobering reminder to educators, especially at the start of a new year, to be sensitive to the experiences and feelings of learners. Here are some excerpts from her reflections about her time walking in the shoes of students:

I have made a terrible mistake.

I waited fourteen 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 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 admins. 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)...

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...

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

- include a mandatory stretch halfway through the 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% of their classes.

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... 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

- 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.
- 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.

Key takeaway #3 – You feel a little bit like a nuisance all day long – 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...

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.

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 (though, admittedly, not all) of the frustration I felt with constant, repetitive questions.

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.

You can access the full teacher's blog post at:

<https://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/a-veteran-teacher-turned-coach-shadows-2-students-for-2-days-a-sobering-lesson-learned/>

School leaders can support “shadowing” by arranging coverage for a few teachers each year. (See <http://shadowstudent.org/> for practical protocols.) Grant

recommended that any participating teacher should take notes, reflect on their shadowing experience, make a report to the full faculty, and facilitate the resulting discussions among colleagues.

Conclusion

These three key ideas—the importance of planning backward from authentic performance, the need for helpful feedback and opportunities to use it, and having empathy for students—are but a few of the many lessons that Grant offered us. Although he is no longer with us, his brilliance lives on in his thought-provoking blog posts (<https://grantwiggins.wordpress.com>), articles and books. His advice elevates our profession and our teachers and students deserve the benefits of his wisdom.

Jay McTighe is an educational author and consultant. He has written 15 books, including the best-selling Understanding by Design® series with Grant Wiggins.