



The first EDgility audit

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I may have stumbled into promising territory this week, quite by accident. And just for the record, it was on Halloween.

I've been doing classroom observations for years, eight years alone at Leysin American School (LAS), my present school. I have observed teachers for a few minutes or the whole hour, for just one class or a series of classes. I've observed with three different online tools we developed and researched ourselves. We use video observations in one of our professional learning programs. Our ESL department head uses a protocol to observe individual students.

And now this week something new. I was the substitute for an English class, armed with the lesson plan and supporting materials. And it ended up being an observation. Without the teacher.

Before the class I opened the Google doc lesson plan that DeLona, our middle school English teacher, had left for me. I've subbed this class before and recognized the structure quickly. Because DeLona starts with a stand up, adapted from scrum, I read through her lesson plan asking myself this:

To what extent could these middle school students (grades 7 and 8 combined, ages 12-14) run this whole class period themselves?

There is of course an obvious way to start answering that question. So I made a few edits to the lesson plan, rewriting her directions written to me, e.g. "Have the students listen to the song Monster Mash ..." into directions written for the students, e.g. "Now listen to Monster Mash..."

I pulled up the youtube video on another tab in Chrome, along with the cloze exercise (an exercise that has the text of the song with certain words replaced by a blank, the point being to listen carefully to the song to understand and write in the missing words).

Then I put each step of the DeLona's directions on its own sticky note. There were eight stickies in total.

I was ready to go.





At the beginning of class I explained that I wanted to see if the students (there were seven of them) could organize the whole class without a teacher. I drew on the whiteboard a simple kanban board with the categories:

- To Do
- Doing
- Stuck, and
- Done.

Then I put the eight stickies in the TO DO column and asked the students to go ahead and start class. I intended to intervene only if they put a sticky in Stuck, which was how they would tell me they needed teacher intervention. I sat down in the back of the room to make notes.

The students moved the first sticky, the Daily Language Review or DLR, to Doing. DLR is a half page with a few sentences filled with spelling and grammar errors that students correct and discuss. This is work they do daily - as the D in the acronym implies - and the students did the independent work for the usual five minutes just fine.

They worked fine, I suppose, because they were doing the exact same thing they always do, only usually DeLona is in the room. The next step didn't go as well. After working independently, DeLona goes over the mistakes the students identified in the DLR. But on this occasion, the students needed to go over the mistakes together. They had neither a leader nor the correct answers to support them.

I was hoping they would self-organize a bit better than they did. There was brief discussion about what usually happens at this point (they follow the teacher's lead as she selects students to go to the board to correct mistakes). This time, though, the students didn't write the sentences on the board, nor send anyone to the board to correct them. Instead, they agreed after about 30 seconds of discussion that they had all completed the sheet and they should move on. The DLR sticky moved from doing to done, even though the independent student work went undiscussed and uncorrected.

Next the students pulled "Listen to the Monster Mash song" into Doing. An experienced teacher can guess how the lesson is structured from this point forward. The students first listen to the song for enjoyment and understanding, then the teacher passes out the cloze exercise and plays the song again while the students fill in the blanks as best they can. The teacher plays the song perhaps a second time, or plays a certain phrase over and over as students try to get the missing words filled in correctly. Finally, the teacher goes over the entire text, students discover what they heard correctly or not, and for good measure, the song is played through one more time, with students singing along if the atmosphere is right.

There was no teacher to scaffold this process. There were stickies that probably weren't entirely clear to them, which I can take a quick failure bow for. Instead of taking the lesson in steps,





which would only gradually release information so they had time to struggle a little to fulfill the intended pedagogical outcome (learning Halloween vocabulary), the students jumped to the more obvious goal, filling in the blanks of the cloze exercise to “be done.” The obvious outcome trumped the pedagogical outcome.

The best way to get the obvious task done was for one student to sit down at the computer while the rest of the class pulled out the cloze exercise. The student at the computer paused after each blank, someone said the word, and they all filled in the blank. Students who didn’t get it called out “What?” and the other students repeated for them.

Voila, the worksheet was finished. But was that the right definition of done? The blanks were filled in without too much attention to the learning. But they moved the sticky to the Done column and only had two stickies left in the To Do column: eat the cookies DeLona had left for them (long sugar cookies dyed green with almonds for fingernails - creepy but tasty!) and silent sustained reading.

The students were very self-regulated at eating the cookies.

And then silent sustained reading. The class was very quiet except for the boy counting his change, which he had a lot of, and with which he was very thorough, for the entire 15 minutes available for reading. But the other six students spent most of their time reading, one in Chinese and the others in English, with one short conversation between two of them for a while and a bit of antsy behavior as the clock neared the end of the hour. They asked if they could leave and hurried out.

What an extraordinary way to observe a class. A teacherless observation. Here’s a couple of the big lessons I got out of it.

First, these students were quite good at working independently on DLR and working independently on silent sustained reading. They were not so good at reviewing their work together, that’s euphemistically expressed, of course. And they were not so good at understanding the purpose and outcome of the classroom exercise. On the other hand, they were very good at making sure the blanks were filled in.

There is a pattern here. The students are good at the things they practice the most. Working quietly, independently, on a worksheet or sitting quietly, independently reading a book are well developed skills. Managing a group quality review and keeping the pedagogical purpose of a task are skills they practice less ... and perform poorly on.





Working with an agile mindset may help provide practice in these more complex skills, and I certainly hope we get the students more practice in those skills. But this first point is just an introduction to the second, main takeaway I had.

Second, if one of our central reasons for investigating the agile mindset is to develop self-regulated learners, the observation that I stumbled upon this Halloween can be part of a concerted effort to track the ability of students to be self-regulated by bringing to light the areas that need the most practice. Imagine that the observation protocol across the middle school is to observe classes that the teacher has gotten ready for the observation ... and then taken the period off when I come to observe. I, of course, don't take over as a substitute, but rather record what the students do better and less better when left to manage the course on their own. This feedback finds its way then into our discussions of how best to support self-regulated learning - what do the students need more practice in, which helps develop our agile mindset.

It makes my hair stand up on end as I think about it. Get a life, you might be thinking. I will in a minute, but for the moment I want to think this through just a little more.

What if we created a "teacherless" day in the curriculum later in the year, say two months from now. Between then and now we do some observations of teacherless classes (or teacherless sections of classes) to see how able the students are to self-regulate and to identify how best to help them learn on their own. We let the students know, of course, that we are headed for a day in the curriculum when they will be their own teachers all day long. They get practice running the show themselves. We as teachers get practice setting up the show to be run by the students. We use the feedback loops we get from our teacherless observations to reflect on our practice. And then we test our practice on the teacherless school day, reflecting together as a group how the process went and how we could improve it a second time around.

If you are familiar with scrum practice, consider those steps in the last half of that paragraph above. You can translate them into scrum terms pretty easily, I bet. I think we have created an agile audit, an EDgility audit, for ourselves.

Best of all, during these observations, teachers take a break. After all, at the end of the day, it's the students who should be tired, not the teachers.

5 November 2016

Dear Middle School Teachers,

I would like to set up a teacherless class day a few months from now.





Leading up to that day I'll be observing your class while you take the hour to prepare, observe another teacher, or accomplish any of the other tasks on your plate.

All I ask is that you set up your class as best you can to run without you. I'll be there to take attendance. I will stay with the class to take notes about how our students go about learning and managing their time.

The point, of course, is to gather feedback regarding the extent of our students abilities to how self-regulate and to identify areas that currently need the most practice. We aim not only to share the subject we love with our students, but also guide them in the lifelong skill of self-regulated learning.

Thank you,

Paul

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