SHADOW A STUDENT CHALLENGE

iste.ascd.org/shadow-a-student

International Society for Transforming Education is on a mission to improve the school experience to create transformational learning experiences for all students. One of the most important steps to improving the student experience is developing a deeper understanding of what school looks and feels like for the students you serve.

Shadowing a student is a great strategy for developing empathy. This workbook is meant to support you on your Shadow journey, from picking the right student, to capturing your observation and notes from the day, to reflecting and synthesizing what you learned, all the way to taking action.



PREPARE



SHADOW



REFLECT



ACT

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Step One

PREPARE

The purpose of the prep phase is to help you set up for a meaningful shadow experience. Now is the time to think about your learning goal for this experience, and what student you should shadow.

EXPECTED TIME

Plan to spend 1 hour on the self-prep exercises
Plan to dedicate a little time, over approximately 5 days, getting set up for your Shadow a Student Day.

1. Create learning goals for your Shadow Day.
2. Choose a student and confirm they're interested.
3. Coordinate with your student, parents, and staff (if necessary).

YOU MAY ASK YOURSELF:

- What do you hope to learn about your school through this Challenge?
- What do you hope to learn about yourself through this Challenge?
- What do you hope to see in your school?

MINDSET: *Question Assumptions*

You'll learn the most from shadowing by having beginner's eyes instead of coming into the Shadow Day with preconceived ideas of what you expect to see at your school.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN?

Creating a learning goal will help you focus your planning for your Shadow Day. Review and reflect on the Transformational Learning Principles to set the stage.

What are some questions or challenges you're curious to explore by shadowing a student?

QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Even if you've shadowed before, each experience is unique. You'll learn the most from shadowing by observing without assumptions. Writing down what you expect to see ahead of time can help you notice when you are keeping an open mind or looking for ways to confirm what you already think.

What are some questions or challenges you're curious to explore by shadowing a student?

CHOOSING YOUR STUDENT: WHO MIGHT YOU LIKE TO LEARN FROM?

Your learning experience will depend a lot on the student you shadow. Give some thought as to how the student you select can help you meet your learning goals.

Student's name _____

Student's grade _____

PREP COORDINATION CHECKLIST

1. Ask parents or guardians for permission
2. Choose a student and confirm they're interested
3. Clear your schedule for the entire day
4. Notify your staff of your absence

Step Two

SHADOW

The purpose of your Shadow Day is to immerse yourself in a student's experience. Plan to spend the entire day - from bus stop to final bell - walking in the shoes of your student.

YOU MAY ASK YOURSELF:

How can I break the ice with my student before we begin our Shadow Day? How can I authentically step into the shoes of my student today?

MEETING YOUR STUDENT

GETTING OVER THE JITTERS

Shadowing can feel like the first day of school all over again. You might find yourself questioning your outfit, where to sit during lunch, and what to talk about with your student. Remember: Your student might feel these things every single day.

To really put yourself in the shoes of your student:

- Wear their shoes! Swap your dress shoes for some sneakers.
- Stuff a backpack full of gym clothes, books, or whatever supplies you'll need to do exactly what your student does.
- Don't forget your notebook!

MINDSET: *Be student-centered*

Try to do everything your student does without judgment. If your student is taking a test, you should take the test too! Have PE next period? Make sure you have gym clothes so you can participate too! Be curious, ask open-ended questions to understand their needs, and continue to look with beginner's eyes at your school.

Think of today as an immersion experience - your goal for the Shadow experience is to focus on seeing the world through your student's eyes. Think about yourself as a cultural anthropologist - and worry about making sense of your observations later.

Here are some questions you may ask yourself as you record your observations:

Actions

What are students doing in class or in the hallways? What do you observe happening as you move through the day?

Environments

What do you notice about student lockers, hallways, or other spaces students hang out? How do you know about the classrooms? How does this seem to affect student learning?

Interactions

How are students interacting with each other? With the teachers? Do these interactions seem routine or special? Who is present throughout the day? What are their roles and relationships to your student?

Objects

What are the objects and devices students have in their environments, and how do they relate to their activities?

Step Three

REFLECT

Now that you've undoubtedly learned some interesting new things, it's time to figure out what all of it means. Taking time to reflect will help you make sense of what you saw, heard, and felt. What transformational learning principles did you see in action?

TURNING OBSERVATIONS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

The observations, quotes, and field notes from your Shadow Day can be inspiring catalysts for improving the student experience at your school. Interpreting your observations helps you come up with meaningful opportunities for positive change. Use the worksheet below to start turning your observations into opportunities.

OBSERVATION

Notice, feel, etc.

I was inactive for most of the day - the only time I moved was for passing periods.

INTERPRET

Why is this happening?

Classtime didn't integrate movement or mobility of students.

OPPORTUNITY

What does this make you wonder?

What if we added a physical/movement activity into each class?

MINDSET: *See challenges as opportunities*

Immersing yourself in a student's life can be overwhelming, tiring, and challenging. You may have seen a lot of room for improvement in your student's experience. That's great! It means you've empathized with him or her enough to see unmet needs, so that they can be addressed.

In addition to reflecting individually, it can be really helpful to share your observations with fellow colleagues, friends, or other Shadowers. Sometimes talking it out will reveal things you didn't notice when processing your observations alone.

Step Four

ACT

You're ready to put your learnings into action and come up with manageable ways to make change at your school.

YOU MAY ASK YOURSELF:

- What is the most pressing student need that should be addressed?
- What's something I can try next week that can help me learn more about my new ideas?
- What makes me the most excited about taking action? The most nervous?

While you may be eager to make big changes right away, it's easier - and starts to address problems quicker - to begin with "quick wins." Rather than a full-blown solution, pilot a solution to rapidly test ideas for immediate feedback.

HERE ARE SOME STEPS TO PLAN AND PILOT A SOLUTION:

Gather Inspiration: Get curious and start asking great questions! What's not working? Where are people struggling? Dig into data sources to uncover those frustrating "pain points" and really connect with what users are experiencing. Here's the key: don't just ask people what they want—they might not know what amazing possibilities exist! Instead, focus on truly understanding their challenges.

Refine the Problem: Time to get laser-focused! Take all those valuable insights and craft crystal-clear problem statements that nail down who you're helping, what challenge you're tackling, and why it matters. The sweet spot? Make sure your problem is big enough to make a real difference but totally doable with your time and resources.

Brainstorm Solutions: This is where the magic happens! Let your creativity run wild and generate tons of potential solutions—no idea is too crazy at this stage. Look everywhere for inspiration: other schools, different industries, even AI! The secret sauce is exploring multiple possibilities before jumping into action. Often the best solutions are brilliant mashups of several great ideas.

Conduct a Pilot: Ready to test your ideas in the real world? Pick your most promising solution and create a simple Minimum Viable Product (MVP)—think "good enough to be helpful" rather than perfect. The goal is learning fast, getting feedback, and improving as you go. Don't over-build; just get something valuable into users' hands!

WRITE DOWN ONE INSIGHT YOU HAVE:

HOW COULD YOU INNOVATE THIS IDEA?

1.

2.

3.

4.

DRAW WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

Dont worry about whether its a "good" drawing–its about communicating a concept, not drawing something pretty.



REFLECT, REFINE, AND SHARE:

Celebration and evaluation time! Did your pilot solve the problem? Were users thrilled with the results? Take note of what worked, what surprised you, and what needs tweaking before expanding. If you've got something great, don't keep it to yourself—share those wins with other schools so everyone can benefit from your innovation! **Share your learnings with us!**

Visit us online to tell us how it went. **www.ISTE-ASCD.org/ShadowAStudent**









REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Want to learn more about shadowing students? Check out the following resources. And please let us know if there are other helpful materials we should amplify. We'd love to hear from you!

Ginsberg, M.B. (February 2012). Stepping into a Student's Shoes. Educational Leadership, 69:5. Retrieved from https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/stepping-into-a-students-shoes

Pope, D. Brown, M., and Miles, S. (2015). Overloaded and Underprepared. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco.

Wiggins, G. (2014) "A veteran teacher turned coach shadows 2 students for 2 days – a sobering lesson learned." Blog post retrieved from: https://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/a-veteran-teacher-turned-coach-shadows-2-students-for-2-days-a-sobering-lesson-learned

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SCHOOL RETOOL

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