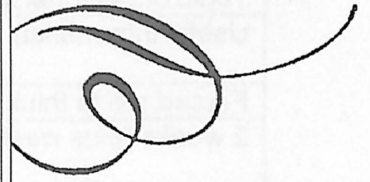


## GETTING BETTER EVERY DAY: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS USE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT TOOLS

by Lori Vandeventer



"Getting Better Every Day: Continuous Improvement Tools for You to Use with Students and Colleagues"...this workshop title struck me as very enticing. As I had learned in my fifteen years of teaching, sometimes a class felt like it was Getting Worse Every Day, especially for seniors in April. During the summer of 2005, I looked forward to attending the AIME Survivor workshop in preparation for my transfer into the media specialist position for the following year. At the time, I was still in senior English teacher mode, and I was anxious to learn how to keep the students and myself focused and motivated.

The valuable tools I learned were easy and practical. I enjoyed the material so much that I decided to ask Sara Laughlin to present this information to my colleagues at Eastern Greene Schools. In February of 2006, Ms. Laughlin made the trek through beautiful south central Indiana and shared insights about finding root causes of problems, check sheets, cause and effect diagrams, cause analysis, Pareto charts, force field analysis, and multivoting.

Everyone working in an Indiana school knows what happens in February: It's cold, kids get cabin fever (as do adults), and Spring Break is a month away. Therefore, the timing of Laughlin's presentation was perfect to lift the teachers' enthusiasm with useful and convenient methods. At the time, my senior English classes were in the midst of a career I-Search project that should have proven practical and relatively easy after many analysis pieces of critiques and explications. However, the students were flat. The I-Search papers did not turn out as well as I expected, and I needed to find out why.

I seized the opportunity to use some of the data collection methods that I had learned from *Getting Better Every Day*. I decided to focus on two techniques: plus/delta charts and force field analysis. After I graded and returned the I-Search projects, we focused on the process and the grades of the projects during a debriefing session. I explained the plus/delta charts to the students. Basically, it is a T chart that includes the positive aspects of the project being listed on the left side (plus) and the changes that need to be made on

the right side (delta). The students respected that I was asking for their opinion. They felt valued and realized that I was treating them as thinkers with suggestions that truly mattered. I received very open and honest answers. The students were gracious with their compliments for the project and for the materials that I had prepared for them as assignment sheets, examples, and rubrics. They explained why the research and writings were meaningful and why they valued the information that they learned. They were just as honest with what needed to be improved. Their suggestions were valid, and I appreciated learning ways to improve my methods and my ancillary materials for this unit. (Figure 1 shows a sampling of the student answers.) We all learned a great deal from the plus/delta charts, and we actually completed others as the year moved forward, with each chart detailing more about improving ourselves as well as the content being studied.

After the plus/delta chart, I wanted to get the students to focus on the writing process and their ability to move through each step. My students were champions with prewriting, organizing, and drafting. However, they simply stopped and didn't move into revising and editing, so I wanted to know why. Stopping after step three of the writing process emerged as a problem during the I-Search, so I led my seniors through a force field analysis study. This method also utilizes a T chart, yet on the left, participants make a list of Moving Forces, while the right side lists the Restraining Forces. I wanted all of us to focus on these issues to encourage productivity, even when the dreaded senioritis tried to settle over our class.

Again, my students were honest and the chart allowed them to see what forces detained them and kept them from achieving more. (Figure 2 provides a sampling of the responses from this exercise.)

My students also enjoyed seeing all of the other classes' responses after I hung up all of the charts around my room. We left up the force field analysis charts for the rest of the year and referred to them when any of us slipped back into the procrastinate mode. I also made good on my dedication to the issues they requested such as more information about quoting

Figure 1: Plus/Delta Chart for the I-Search Project

| +  | Δ   |
|--|---|
| Topic of personal interest                             | Interviews were hard because of time limits   |
| Useful information                                     | Hard to get valid responses from some people because we were "just" high school kids                                      |
| Forced me to think of future seriously                 | My questions were repetitive.   |
| 2 weeks (plus weekends) to complete                    | Would like to have shadowed the professional, but ran out of time   |
| Able to interview current professionals                | Research sites repeated information   |
| Project didn't sound boring                            | Computers were old and died on us   |
| Other teachers helped, too                             | Procrastinated  |
| How-to pages, rubric helpful                           | Needed more advanced warning for the interviews to set them up and have time for better interactions                      |
| Encouraged creativity with set-up                      | No checkpoint due dates, all due at the end   |
| Writing more informal                                  | The "My Decision" section needed a better example.  |
| Helped us learn research techniques                    | The Work Keys program in the middle of the unit took away valuable time that we needed on computers (since they crashed). |
| Left room for comparing two similar careers            | Provide a possible list of informants for interviewing  |
| Learned not to procrastinate                           | Websites were hard to use...more instruction would help.  |
| Helped me decide that career is not really what I want | Include more details on rubric  |
| Examples were helpful                                  | Five sources were too many because of the repetitive information.   |

Figure 2: Force Field Analysis for Getting Past Step Three of Writing Process

| Moving Forces  | Restraining Forces   |
|--|--|
| Wanting to graduate  | Time devoted to other classes                              |
| Get better grades on papers                                      | Time devoted to my job/social life/extra curricular/sports |
| Fear of making Vandeventer angry/wanting to make her proud of me | Procrastinator/lazy  |
| Take pride in work   | Siblings too loud for me to concentrate                    |
| Learn now because no one holds hands next year(s)                | Scared to grow up  |
| Parents get angry when grades are bad                            | Being pushed out of my comfort zone                        |
| Maturing/growing up  | I just don't care.   |
| Making other teachers proud of me, too                           | Previous grades discourage me.                             |
| Moving on and getting away from home                             | Computers crash anyway.                                    |
| Not taking this class again/graduating with classmates           | Rely on Vandeventer too much                               |
| Relieve stress by getting finished                               | X Box and Play Station                                     |
| Taking responsibility for my future                              | Didn't know what questions to ask to get past step three   |
| Meet the goals I've set for myself                               | Not knowing how to do some of the quotes                   |

sources and more discussion of which effective questions to ask. I am happy to report that my students demonstrated more successful and alert attitudes through March, April, and May. Learning and teaching are challenging tasks, but these techniques really did help us to become better at reaching our goals every day.

My transfer out of the senior English classroom occurred in June of 2006. I am now the media specialist at Eastern Greene, but I still use these techniques. New challenges meet me at every turn, especially as I plan for our opening day collection for the new high school building. I often refer to the plus/delta and force field analysis charts, as well as other data gathering tools as a visual representation of my tasks so that I can be more productive. It still feels enticing to be getting better every day!

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lori Vandeventer is the library/media specialist at Eastern Greene Schools. She earned her B.S. in secondary English education at Indiana State University and her MLS at IU Bloomington. She spent 16 years as an English teacher before moving into the library/media center for the 2006-2007 school year. She is now in the middle of a building project, preparing her current space to become the middle school library while also directing the opening day collection for the new high school. Contact her at [lvandeventer@egreene.k12.in.us](mailto:lvandeventer@egreene.k12.in.us)