

Lean in the Classroom

Lean in the classroom? You bet!

In the Fall/Winter issue of *Compass* Rudy Ouwersloot challenged us with the title of his article “Lean in the Classroom?” My eyes lit up when I saw this heading and I was excited by what I read. Why? Because I had recently been exposed to the basic nuts and bolts of *Lean* and I had just charted a Lean ‘course’ in my classroom. What I appreciated, amongst other things, about Ouwersloot’s article is his desire to see Lean applied to workplaces other than just manufacturing facilities. In this article, I’d like to share how I learnt about Lean and give color to Lean as it could be applied to the classroom first and foremost, but also to all of life.

What is Lean?

Let’s review. Ouwersloot in his article defined Lean this way: “it’s a philosophy of producing only what’s needed, when it’s needed, with the least amount of excess. Lean identifies and eliminates waste in a structured and proactive approach.” While this definition is accurate, it quite clearly is focused on manufacturing where the philosophy of Lean originated. In my classroom, I have endeavored to make Lean real simple. I would define it this way: “Lean is the reduction of waste through continuous improvement.”

How did it all start?

I was exposed to the power of Lean last summer when I toured the facility of a manufacturing company called Fastcap in Bellingham, Washington USA. The owner of the company, Paul Akers, has lived and breathed Lean for the past 10 years and his company has benefitted immensely from staff training in Lean principles. As a way of forwarding on what he has learnt, Akers offers a “Learn to See” tour of his company each Friday morning to help other community members learn Lean. In fact, he has executives flying in from all over the world to tour his facility. And here’s the kicker: There is nothing impressive about the industrial park they work in, the building is very plain, and the production of wood working tools is not something you would write home about! People come to visit to see the Lean CULTURE in action! On my tour, I witnessed employees engaged in the “Morning Meeting” and being empowered to bring change and improvement to the shop floor. In other words, continuous improvement in action – every day – from the bottom up! I drove home that day thinking, “Surely the power of a Lean culture in the workplace could be applied to a classroom too”. To me this was an exciting prospect.

Learning Lean

To gain a further understanding of Lean I went to Fastcap’s website (fastcap.com) and watched many of the Lean videos they have produced. These videos of small Lean improvements demonstrated the principle that Lean should be learnt by doing. A small improvement every day, by everyone, from the guy on the shop floor to the executive in the office, can bring huge benefits to a company in the long run. Documents on the Fastcap website, adaptable for other situations, were also useful in beginning the implementation in the classroom.

How does it apply in the classroom?

I teach in a grade 7/8 classroom. During the first week of school I like to set a foundation and culture for learning. We all do this in some way, teaching our own expectations, routines and ways of doing things. But last September my mission was a little different compared to that in other years. I had Lean on my mind. To teach the students about this ‘new’ concept of Lean, I showed a selection of Lean (Fastcap) videos every day for the first few weeks. I hoped it would help my students understand what continuous improvement was all about and how we could set about applying it to the classroom environment. After a week of learning, the students were challenged to come to school each day with an improvement they had made at home or at school. The improvement had to save them 2 seconds in their day. Just 2 seconds! Setting the threshold

so low meant that every student could find something to change or improve. Waste was reduced in having a 'home' for the stapler in the classroom, bringing a light switch closer to a desk, putting the dog food in a more accessible place, having a Leaner routine before school, thereby reducing the waste of motion or wait times. It did not take the students long to "get it" and before long they were seeing waste all over the place. We purchased a little Flip-video recorder and the students began producing and editing their own videos to explain their 2-second improvements.

Building a Lean culture includes goal setting. Together as a class we set goals for the year which we posted on the wall of the classroom. With the beginning of a Lean culture in the makings – a question that inevitably comes is – how do we sustain this? How do we keep it alive throughout the year? That's where the "morning meeting" comes in. Each and every morning a different student will lead the class through our fifteen minute "morning meeting" agenda. In addition to the traditional opening devotions we review our classroom goals, our Lean principles, we share our Lean improvements for the day, we study the principles of the US constitution, review the 8 deadly wastes and to finish up we stretch. The morning meeting keeps our positive (Lean) culture alive. More than that, as a class, we are developing a team-orientated focus. We are working together and together we are looking to continuously improve – not just in the sphere of Lean – but in our everyday work.

What are the benefits of Lean in the bigger picture?

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this year I enjoy the best classroom culture in all my 13 years of teaching. A Lean mindset has everyone thinking continuous improvement. As Christian teachers that's what we want our students to be striving for. We want them to improve/develop the talents that God has given them and to be intrinsically motivated. A Lean mindset has teachers and students thinking of innovative ways to save time and motion in distributing and storing materials, handing back homework assignments, having good visual control in the teacher work room, reducing trips to the photocopier, keeping the PE storage room neat, and the list goes on. A Lean mindset engages all learners as they look for ways to turn their work environment into an organized one. There are additional spin-offs. Every day the students are involved in developing their public speaking skills as they lead or participate in the morning meeting. Each student has an opportunity to shine as he or she uses his or her particular talents to make improvements. To understand what I mean take some time to check out the videos that the students have produced by going to my teacher page on our school website:

www.cornerstoneschool.us. The students have also noticed the difference that Lean makes. One student said: "Lean changed me, in that now, whenever I do anything, whether it be at home or school, I see that every process can be more efficient, making me more productive" And another student said: "Lean changed me in that I now use my skill of quality workmanship, and get involved in the classroom, so I can work to the best of my ability."

Lean has made a big impact on me as a Christian classroom practitioner. My initial excitement about Lean as a responsible, culture-changing way of thinking has only increased with its application to my teaching and my students' learning. Building a culture of continuous improvement has made a big change in many areas of the classroom – ranging from tapping into the different talents of each student, to setting a standard and expectation of quality workmanship, to having the students develop leadership skills through their taking charge of the routines in the classroom. The students are becoming world class problem solvers and critical thinkers both in the Lean changes they make but also in the challenges they face in their everyday work. Are you interested?! I encourage you to check out 2secondlean.com and my teacher webpage for more information. The investment of time that you make to learn about Lean will pay back in spades as you seek to become a Leaner practitioner at school and at home.