4. Describe a problem you’ve solved or a problem you’d like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma — anything of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

Annoyance, distaste, and disunited were the feelings I felt every Friday at 2:30 pm. It was our school’s weekly games event. The school’s intentions were good: they wanted the students to have fun and strengthen our sense of togetherness. Unfortunately, it turned out to be the opposite. Only half consistently showed up while the rest decided to leave 45 minutes early. The teachers made us form groups and compete by class. It was a good idea, except for the fact that the games they perceived as fun and community-building were irrelevant to us (due to generation gap). Consequently, the events became too cheesy and half of us skipped altogether. Seeing this continue each week broke my heart. So, I decided to roll up my sleeves and do something. Who would’ve thought that the problem solving process that I learned in science class helped me accomplish my goal: a school event that strengthened the bonds between students.

As the student council’s VP, I was eager to contribute and make the event better for both the students and the school; something that would really strengthen the students’ relationship instead of distancing them. I voiced my concerns to fellow council members and to the teachers and school directors that, with the current condition, the events would end up being counterproductive. Unfortunately, the school board ignored my “nudge.” To make them respond, I spent weeks devising the event’s feedback surveys and collected attendance data to strengthen my argument and convince the school. Eventually, they responded and put the student council in charge of reforming the event.

I remembered the problem solving process in science class: Research, Identify, Brainstorm, Select solution, Experiment, and Review. Thus, I proposed using this process to improve the weekly games event. Obviously, since we are dealing with human factors, we have to slightly modify the process to Empathy, Define, Brainstorm, Prototype, and Testing.

Empathy was the first step: the students’ inputs on games day were crucial. So, insight-gathering student surveys and interviews were done to determine the kinds of activities the student find attractive. My initial thought was to make the events comprised of purely competitive sports. However, the data begged to differ. The list of desired activities were much more diverse than expected: sports, arts, culinary, and even trivial games (Jenga, Twister, etc).

As one problem is solved (the activities), another emerged (fitting all activities within 45 minutes). Defining the problem and brainstorming solutions come next. All ten of us continuously met and generated ideas to fit these activities given the allotted time, but nothing worked. Hours turned to days and discouragement started building until we came across this one idea: scrap everything and make it a full day event.

Prototype and testing were the final step. We generated and simulated different scenarios from activities combinations/permutations, scheduling, and buffer time using the good old spreadsheet and its amazing features. Students from different years and classes were randomly divided into teams. We incorporated a “Harry Potter” style house system – Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow Houses – to keep them engaged, increase competitiveness, and gain camaraderie (courtesy of our student council Harry Potter marathon night). Points were accumulated after each activity depending on the team’s performance. On the D-day, Google Form was used to track the students’ attendance and feedbacks to validate our reformed event.

As I nervously collected the students’ responses, the reformed games day received positive reviews. Despite receiving apathetic responses from the school at first, I’m glad I pushed through in making what I desired, real. Since then, a strong sense of togetherness started to form. Not only that, the ten of us also gained valuable lessons: problem solving, better teamwork, and delegation. Who would’ve thought that something that I learned in science classes could be applied to making my school a more fun and unified environment.