

My name is Heidi Perez and I am a full time ESOL instructor at the Adult Learning Center in Lawrence, Massachusetts. We are a large center offering classes in ESOL, ABE and GED. Our sessions run in the morning, afternoon and evenings and we serve approximately 575 students in the combined programs. Our day program holds classes four mornings for a total of 15 hours per week and four afternoons for a total of 9 hours per week. Our evening program is two nights a week for a total of six hours. Our staff has both full and part-time instructors.

Our center discovered that the process of goal setting and meeting countable outcome goals is challenging and we have fumbled and learned how to manage it along the way. It is still a work in progress and we are constantly evolving and looking for new and better ways to make it meaningful for students and capture outcomes while at the same time not letting it overwhelm our teaching staff and counselors.

Each member of our staff has contributed to making Countable Outcomes an integral part of our program. My contribution has been as an instructor looking for the best ways to set goals, help my students attain their goals, and capturing their goals. Currently I am teaching the Beginning Literacy students and when I first began teaching this level, I found it extremely challenging to help the students grasp what it was I was trying to do! I've tried out many strategies along the way; getting translators, attempting to guess what students needed and getting lucky and capturing it along the way. My most recent strategy has been the most successful. This strategy is to make Countable Outcomes an integral part of my teaching.

Setting Goals

Most teachers, when given the SMARTT countable outcome form to set goals, make this part of their registration process and do it on day one or two. One important thing I've learned is to WAIT. I just begin teaching and then I start the process of setting goals at about two weeks into the session. I wait for many reasons. First, I can get an idea of who my students are. When I know who they are, I can begin to see things like who are parents? How long have they lived in the country? How long do they plan to stay? Another important thing to know is if they like their life here or are they just "biding" their time until they can return to their country. I try to learn things about their jobs, families, and their health. These facts about my students help me to know where to begin. I keep it all in the back of my head for when we start.

A second reason to wait is because these conversations can be personal. I need my students to trust me, the school, and their classmates. No adult would feel comfortable talking about their goals in a room full of strangers on the first or second day of school. So, I wait it out and I give the students time to get settled in.

The third reason I wait is to save me some work. As many ABE practitioners know and hate to admit, some students come for a day or two and then, for whatever reason, decide not to come back. To set goals is a time consuming process and we've all had the

experience of investing a great deal of time and then have the student not return. So, wait a bit to start.

To set the goals I begin by asking students why they are in class. Almost always the answer is, “to learn English”. I continue to ask them why they need to learn English and again they answer very typically, “for a better life” or “because I live in this country”. (Most ESOL teachers have heard these answers a million times). But then I continue to press the conversation to lead to my essential question “*I need English to do what?*” I keep this on the board and as we continue our vocabulary building and lessons, this question encourages the ideas to flow.

The next step is to build some vocabulary. Students, especially at the beginning levels, need to have the tools to express themselves. I do many activities with the vocabulary pictures and words. I first use large pictures and have the student study them. Then I’ll cut the words off of the picture and ask the students to match the pictures to the words. I’ve even given them a quiz to give them extra motivation to study the words. As the students begin working with the vocabulary, I watch them carefully. I typically see some “a-ha” moments take place when something they want to do in their lives comes across their work spaces. As a teacher works with these goal pictures and words, the whole idea of what a goal in the United States really means begins to take on meaning. Culturally, the process of setting goals could be different depending on the native country. These activities start to help with understanding the big picture of goal setting.

When the students are armed and ready with the vocabulary, I am ready to begin the process of setting the goals. I pass out smaller versions of the picture cards. The students will use these for the upcoming lessons and later to help keep goals and goal attainment a constant presence in the classroom. I begin first by talking about the difference between a long and a short term goal. I use time-lines and other visuals to help students grasp this idea. Then I ask the students to take out their “long term goals” and set them aside. We use them for discussions with small groups or in pairs. Then I begin to do lessons that help students grasp another “essential idea” that *long term goals are achieved by meeting smaller, short term goals*. I lead the students through a variety of activities that model this concept. I take an easy to understand example, such as citizenship. Before one can achieve this lofty goal there are steps that build up to this goal. One must learn about US culture and history, correctly fill out and send in the application, receive the appointment letter, pass the exam, and get sworn in. There is a typical sequence of goals and students begin to see that short term goals are stepping stones to meeting long term goals. Then I ask the students to follow the same process. They select a long term goal and find the short term goals that are a necessary step for achieving it.

At the beginning of each activity, there is a place that allows my students to place goals that they’ve already achieved. This is an important part of the process because it’s a place for students to honor their past accomplishments. It’s also informative for me as an instructor to know what my students past experiences have been so that I can build upon their strengths in our learning. I also have found it helpful to know if one student has

attained a goal that another student has selected, I can pair the two together and one can help the other. Take for example getting a driver's license. I have had many students who pair up and one student helps the other study and practice for the test.

When I think the students are ready after practicing with the "steps" activity and time lines, I ask them to pull out some goals that they think they can or would like to accomplish this year. I usually give them an envelope to use to keep them in and then I make my way around the room to work individually with the students. With me I have my DOE goals sheet so that as I work with the students, I can also complete the paper. When I sit down, I first look at my student's long term goals and make another attempt at getting to know them a little bit. It's amazing what you learn about a person when you hear about their "dreams", because a long term goal at this stage really is a dream. We then look through their short term goals and decide what is attainable and what maybe needs to wait. In some cases I've had students who select many goals. I may have a discussion about focusing in on a more manageable number so that they don't get overwhelmed. In other cases, students have felt that they don't have any goals to select, and then I can work with them to find ones that they didn't realize they were already ready to try for. Then students put some goals in their envelopes and I complete the sheet for DOE on the spot. Typically I select three of four goals that were chosen after much discussion. I find that when the decision is informed by so much preparation, it's easier to keep track of, document, and there is much less going back and changing. In the end, this saves me time and I can focus on teaching and helping students reach their goals.

Maintaining and Attaining

Maintaining goals and keeping track can be challenging as the year marches on. When I first started the process, I filled out the paper and then I'd forget to make the time to go back and check in with them. The negative results of this cost time and outcomes! First, my students were reaching their goals and I wasn't aware of it, therefore they weren't getting them documented. Second, I wasn't giving my students the support they needed to attain their goals. So many lost opportunities!

The practice I've found that works the best is to create a prominent place in the classroom for goals. For some classes there could be a special file folder for goals, others have them in a section in students work folders, and others have created bulletin boards that are interactive and constantly evolving. Depending on the class make-up, I've made the decision based on what works best for the culture of my class. Years that I've had a younger group that may not want their goals spread across a wall we've used the folders. Other years when the class seems comfortable with sharing their personal lives I've used the bulletin board idea. Either way the point is that goals are visible so that they become a part of your classroom curriculum, rather than something that needs to get "done" every so often.

Each month I carve out time and ask the students to get their goals envelopes or folders out. We then look through them and have discussions on what students have done or what do they need to do. Typically I'll select one student and we'll work on steps together of

how to achieve that specific goal. The rest of the class benefits from being a part of the process and it allows them to see how to transfer the same skills into their goals. This process also informs my instruction because usually in a group you see patterns of topics that are of interest to many in the class. For example in one class there were many newly arrived immigrants who were concerned about the weight they had gained since living in the United States. There were enough students interested that I called a local agency that came in and gave classes in nutrition. The students learned a vital skill, they improved their English through a topic that was clearly of interest to them, and they all achieved a goal. In another example, there were many students who wanted to get their driver's license. I went to the Registry of Motor Vehicles and got information. Then I designed a unit about getting a license in the United States that included information about the permit test, buying a car, car insurance, and safety laws. We even had a policeman come to the class to do a workshop about getting pulled over and how to handle it. This workshop was invaluable for students as they were preparing for the driving part of the test and were very intimidated by sitting next to the officer who evaluates them.

When I began to link the Countable Outcomes to my instruction, the entire process pulled together and it was a win-win situation. My students truly do improve their lives and at the same time I meet my obligation to DOE and my school for having students complete the required number of goals. Yet the most important benefit for me is that this process drives my instruction. I know that I'm personalizing my students' instruction to meet their exact needs so that they can "have a better life" in the United States.