

# BARRIERS TO SUCCESS INCLUDE BARRIERS TO ASPIRATION

**Sylvia Van Nooten**

Montrose Adult Education Center

In this Practitioner Perspective article with instructional strategies, I demonstrate the techniques I use to help my adult English language learners aspire and succeed in choosing and working towards a career. The steps I use include: pair work, multi-level strategies, student presentations, research on the Internet, and field trips to businesses and the local vocational-technical college culminating with a trip to the Workforce Center. My goal is to motivate them out of the rut of 'can't do it' and onto a career pathway that allows them financial security and hope.

Ask my female English language learners what their dream job is and most of them will look at me like I'm crazy. They don't dare dream. They may have an interest in something other than housekeeping and childcare as ways of making money, yet putting their dreams into words is beyond them.

**"Get your ESL students into the workforce!"** sums up the direction the funders of adult education want AEs to move. I wish it were that easy. Many of my women students don't want to be in the workforce. They are very busy, stay-at-home moms. When I began to implement more soft skills and workplace dialogues these women went along but they still weren't convinced. I needed to find a way to make getting a job a realistic and exciting prospective.

What are the barriers to aspiration and what causes them? I'll list three I have encountered but I am sure there are more.

- Living in a country that doesn't necessarily want you forces people into a mental state of fear and hiding which blocks the ability to dream of a different life.
- When women come from a culture that primarily values them as mothers and wives only, it is difficult for them to break out and become independent.
- Struggle for survival/security and lack of education curbs the ability to dream.

Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" touches on all of the above. (See Figure 1.)

## LESSON PLANS: TAKING ACTION

**Teacher: "What is your dream job?"**

**Students: "I don't know."** (Shrugs. Eye rolls. Indulgent smiles. What does teacher want now?)

Time for an activity. Pair work is how we began. Below is a worksheet I created which can

be a multi-level activity if you do the vocabulary together as a class with higher-level students writing the words on the board.

### What's Your Dream Job?

**Use the Picture Dictionary. Write 3 to 5 jobs you would like to have.**

I am interested in \_\_\_\_\_.


**Think about why you like these jobs. What are some adjectives that describe them?**


**Interview your classmates: Why do you like these jobs?**

**Write their answers**

Job
Reason

**Higher-level students:** Write a paragraph about the job you are most interested in.

**Lower-level students:** Tell the teacher about your job; teacher or higher-level student writes it on the board to be copied.

After this activity we have an open discussion. Students read their work. More is revealed. I had no idea what my students' interests were. We simply needed to create a comfortable space for people to share. Here are two examples of student writing:

“My dream job would be to become a veterinarian, because I like the animals but I need to study to learn. To help my animals and the animals of my friends. I have good work maybe my own clinic I dream with shower the dogs, give shots, give medicine, to have other types of animals. It would be a great satisfaction.” ~Celia

“My dream job would be to become a chef. In this job I cook and create different dishes. I have to make different food. Yes, special classes are needed. Some of the things I need are special pans good knives. I need my uniform and my chef hat. I cook Mexican food like Asado Rojo, tamales, Ensalada de pollo.” ~Elena

### Internet Research: Combining ESL with Learning How to Navigate the Web.

Our classes are organized so that all students spend an hour using technology. With the help of a paraprofessional, all the students began to research the job that most interested them. Some had a basic understanding of using a search engine, for others we started from scratch. None of them had any experience using the keyboard. These are all skills they need to

know for college and the workforce. As they were interested in their topic, they persisted.

#### Skills Practiced:

- Search for data about a job
- Find and download pictures about their chosen job
- Print pictures and begin to assemble material for a presentation
- Write the presentation using Word, learning spell check and grammar checks (The latter raised a lot of good grammar questions!)

I would never claim this lesson went perfectly smoothly and everyone learned everything they needed about computers. To me, adult education is baby steps, building confidence, motivating. This lesson managed that much, at least, and everyone got their data, pictures, and started writing their presentation.

The presentations were a hit. They included the steps the students needed to take in order to achieve their goals. The graphics were beautiful and the presenters had a friendly, attentive audience for their dream. I have them hanging in my classroom to inspire a new semester of students.

## INTRODUCING THE EXPERTS

### Removing Barriers to the Workforce and Higher Education

The idea of going to college is intimidating for many of those who *are* native speakers of English. The paperwork, finances—just dealing with a new step in life—is difficult. My program decided to bring our students to the Vocational-Technical College so they could meet the instructors and other students. They got a tour of the college, peeked in on some classes, and met several instructors, all of whom were friendly and encouraging. I could see the class relax. They asked questions and took notes. They realized that yes they could do this, if they persisted in learning English.

All my students have high aspirations for their children. Many of their questions were focused on what age a high school student could enroll, how much it would cost. My student Rocio got information about the Police Academy and her son is now enrolled for next semester.

We finished the semester with a field trip to the Workforce Center where the students learned how to navigate job searches, practiced interviews, and talked about their potential and skills. More inspiration leads to aspiring. Curiosity begets aspiration, not just for students but for educators as well.

What I as a teacher learned from the field trips and activities was important too. I realized I had been challenged in my ability to aspire *for* my students. Sure my classes are fun; sure we look at the building blocks of language in innovative ways and do many types of activities—yet I get discouraged when concepts we practice so much still don't stick. I don't aspire for

students who are irregular attendees to class. I look at beginners and wonder, “How am I ever going to get them to learn the verb *to be*?”

At the college field trip, watching students’ *curiosity* about what was presented showed me something lacking in my classroom. I really need to make my lessons more favorable to curiosity. To do that requires more real-life and less of the abstract. ☺

**FIGURE 1: MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

