

Are We There Yet?

by Kathleen Simmons (Texas)

If you are a parent, you've undoubtedly heard this question before. As an ESL instructor, I began to think about the journey that my students are on and the questions they must continually ask themselves about this very personal journey. "Am I there yet?" "Am I better off now than I was then?" "Is this worth it?" "Can I really do this?" As a fellow adult learner who started college at the age of 38, I can relate to the pressures and difficulties that come with the decision to better yourself and your family. You make the initial choice to enroll and hopefully start classes, but believe me, it's a never ending battle and constant struggle to continue to move forward when distractions, trials, and this thing called life get in the way.

In the last month alone, I've seen this truth repeated numerous times. A woman working full-time, raising a family and attending classes has a terrible car accident, totals her vehicle, and spends two days in the hospital with a serious back injury. Another woman determined to learn English comes to classes tired and stressed because her husband and employer don't think that this use of her time is worthwhile. Pregnancies, illnesses, children that need time and attention, juggling two jobs – the list goes on. Combine the difficult lives of our students with the need of teachers to teach, ensure progress and enforce attendance requirements, and it's easy for everyone to feel stressed and frustrated at times.

So, how do we help our students "get there?" I think the answer is, "any way we can." I've found as a teacher that I need to be so much more than just the person who gives them "book learning." I'm also required to be a guidance counselor, motivational speaker, encourager, friend and mentor. It's often a skilled balancing act, understanding and having empathy for students and what they are experiencing while at the same time fulfilling the requirements that our program calls for with respect to progress, testing, and attendance. A tough assignment yes, but doable. I've learned that the small things make a big difference and that a simple word of acknowledgement or a smile and a pat on the back can have a great impact. I recall as a single mother raising a young daughter, how alone and unappreciated I often felt. One night while attending my daughter's open house at school, I was leaving her classroom when her Science teacher approached me, laid a hand on my shoulder and said, "You're doing a great job with her." I teared up immediately, so touched that someone had acknowledged what I was doing and had taken the time to tell me that I was doing a good job. I remember that incident to this day because it demonstrates the power of a word and a gentle act of kindness. We need to always remember that a personal relationship, a kind word, or a gentle act goes a long way.

Whether it's small goals or larger ones, allowing students to achieve some lesser goals and build from there will often inspire them to continue their efforts and not give up. This is the reason I will often give short, simple tests on a regular basis. I've found that successfully mastering small things while at the same time learning the language as a whole can keep students from feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. When I first began teaching, I didn't score tests, but I have found that my students actually like having a number grade some of the time and experience a great feeling of pride and accomplishment when they see a good grade on a paper. For those who still struggle, even with the smallest achievements, I allow them to correct the test, turn it in a second time and then give the grade.

Portfolios are also a wonderful way to remind students of the great strides they are making. I like to place certain papers and activities in a student's portfolio at the beginning of the school year and then repeat the exact same activity six to eight weeks later, compare the two papers and allow the students to see in black and white how much they've grown and what they've mastered. This

can be a continuing process, constantly revisiting past activities; it's a great review for the student and shows them how far they've come. I also like to give practical homework assignments to students on a regular basis, i.e. teach a child a song, read their spouse a story, use a simple phrase or question in their homes one evening, etc. Demonstrating their abilities and sharing the learning experience with their families can empower them and motivate them to continue the process. Small successes can ensure the continued larger success of the student.

Inevitably, some students will find the challenges and requirements of adult education classes too difficult. In these instances, treat the situation as a temporary one instead of a permanent one. Impress upon the student that just because they aren't currently able to pursue their education, they shouldn't consider this decision a permanent one. Life is constantly changing and when their circumstances or situation improve, they might return to try again.

"Are we there yet?" an age-old question, and in the area of adult education, I think the answer much of the time is "Not quite, but we're staying the course and enjoying the journey."

About the Author

Kathleen works for the Literacy Council of Tyler and is the Adult Education Supervisor at the Family Learning Center of Tyler. She currently teaches an ESL beginner class. She's been in adult education for over four years. She has a Bachelor of Science Degree from The University of Texas at Tyler. She also has her ESL teaching certification from UT Tyler.