

Combining Retirement and Passion for ESL

2013 Harold B. Allen Award Winner

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Staying retired from Adult Basic Education becomes a challenge when the people and the work are so meaningful.

Six years ago, after more than 20 years in the field of Adult Basic Education primarily teaching ESL, I retired from my full time job as an ESL Lead Teacher. The truth is, however, that I have never really retired. I merely changed locations, changed some responsibilities, and changed the amount of time I report to work. Recently, someone asked me why I stay involved with the field and why I keep coming back for more.

Three reasons I keep coming back

1. *The gift of meaningful and challenging work*

In my current part-time job I wear several hats: I teach in a multi-level class, I am a support person doing intake and assessments for an evening English language program, I'm the volunteer coordinator, and I do teacher training and other duties as assigned. Each of these responsibilities has significance, purpose, and meaning for me. Our students generally seek out our ABE program; they are motivated to learn, to improve their skills, and to visualize a better future for themselves and their children. As teacher, support person, volunteer coordinator, or teacher trainer I know that I can help make some of that happen for our students. Therefore, in my mind, my job makes a difference; it goes beyond me. It is a gift I cherish.

Over the years I've worked in many different instructional settings. None has been as challenging AND satisfying as teaching in an adult English language classroom. Here there is diversity in abundance, there is sporadic attendance, there is the stress of having learners make gains on mandated assessments. How do I handle that? I get creative for the sake of the learners. Whining about the frustrations doesn't help a bit. Creativity turns challenges into positives and everyone benefits

2. *The chance to engage with amazing students and colleagues*

The students in our program, both past and present, are very dear to me. They are part of my professional network and keep me connected to learning. Where else can one be exposed to so many different cultures, a variety of languages, and a plethora of life's experiences? It's like attending a university course every time I come to work. In our program and in professional organizations such as MinneTESOL I connect with colleagues striving to improve their teaching, training, and leadership skills. In essence it is being connected with like-minded individuals who demonstrate pride in the profession they have chosen.

Throughout my professional career I've had the good fortune to work on several state committees and new state initiatives. This involvement continues now that I've "retired." I love interacting with much younger professionals, who are dedicated, knowledgeable, and have so much to offer the field of adult education. It is very energizing and empowering. Each and every one has confidence in their abilities and has helped develop confidence in me.

3. The push out of the comfort zone and new opportunities to learn

My father, who died at age 88, believed one is never too old to work and learn. Right up to the end he continued to sharpen saws for the local carpenters and to investigate new ways to make that saw blade as sharp as possible. I got that same gene. I'm not sharpening saws, but I'm learning how to use technology, albeit in very small baby steps. Long gone is the overhead projector and transparencies. Now my laptop and an LCD projector are part of my presentations. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone. I'm stretching myself and ABE has provided the setting.

Technology is only one area that has been a learning experience. Another is being more effective in the classroom and then sharing that expertise. Currently, I'm involved with the [ACES](#) (Academic, Career, and Employability Skills) project and have learned how to use skills identified in the [Transition Integration Framework](#) (TIF) in my classroom; that is, I am learning how to intentionally integrate critical transition strategies to set our students up for success in postsecondary education, the workplace, or in their communities. This reminds me of one of my daughters who is very involved in the sport of curling. Curling is all about strategies: knowing which to use, when to use it, and aiming for the target. I've learned that TIF-ing a classroom is very much like that: choosing a strategy, using it, and bringing our learners to their goal.

So, why do I stay in ABE?

I can't seem to stay "retired." I stay in the field of ABE because my work matters, I am part of a wide circle of amazing ABE colleagues, and I have more to learn. It doesn't get much better than that.

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Rosemary Sharkey has taught adult ABE/ESL for many years abroad, at Shakopee/Chaska, and Northfield/Farmington. She served on the MinneTESOL executive board as vice president and president and continues to serve on the state conference planning committee. Currently, she is an Academic Career and Employability Skills (ACES) trainer for Adult Basic Education and serves on the MN Adult Basic Education Professional Issues Committee. She holds Master's degrees in Learning Disabilities and English as a Second Language.