

How Do You Define Success? By Gail Janecka, Counselor - The Victoria College, TX

In my role as a community college counselor, I have frequently been asked to make presentations to groups of college bound students in addition to teaching current college students in a course called Strategic Learning. Thus far, every group I've encountered has unanimously agreed that success is a desirable goal for college-goers. Yet, when asked to define success on an individual basis, the students often gaze at me with blank looks on their faces. Few are able to articulate their vision of success. "How Do You Define Success?" is a fifty-minute activity that has been a favorite in both the classroom and in workshop settings. Through exposure to quotations about success, group brainstorming, class discussion, independent journaling, and paired sharing, my students begin to articulate their personal definitions of success. Although the topic of this activity is defining "success," instructors across the curriculum could easily use this activity to encourage students to think more deeply about their own discipline. For example, instead of a prompt about defining success, the question could be "How do you define a good scientist...or a good historian...or a good writer?" Instead of quotations on success, then, the quotations would relate to science, history, or good writing...inviting students to think more critically about these disciplines.

PURPOSE

*To empower students with the opportunity to articulate their personal definition of success

*To help establish a sense of community within a group of learners as they explore others' definitions of success

SUPPLIES/SET UP

*Set of Success Quotes-- Reproduce a selection of timeless wisdom quotes relating to "success" (one quotation for each student) in the following manner: Print each quote (with the author's name) on a single page using a large, easy-to-read font. Then number the individual pages, and slip them into plastic binder page sleeves or have the pages laminated. You will find numerous quotations about success at <http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/Getting%20On%20Course003.htm>

*Dry erase board, flip chart, or overhead projector & markers for recording group feedback.

*Paper for participants to write on if student journals are not available (as in a workshop setting).

*Handouts---one for each participant---containing all of the success quotes (and their authors) used in the lesson. Give these out at the very end of the lesson.

*Chairs for participants arranged in a circle.

DIRECTIONS

1. Begin by asking students what "success" means to them. Encourage students to express aloud their personal definitions.

2. Announce, "We're now going to look at how others define success." With students sitting in a circle, distribute to each student a page containing one quotation. Say, "Silently read each quote, jotting down key words that strike you as important to defining success. If you find a quote that speaks to you in a powerful way, write down the number of that quote. Then pass your quote page

to the person on your right. Try to view as many quotes as possible in the time allocated. (15 min.)

3. While allowing time for these silent observations, monitor individuals who may be causing a "bottleneck" and remind them that they can skip certain quotes, since they will have the opportunity to read all of the quotes again at a later time. At the end of the observation period, call time and ask, "Which words or phrases appear on your lists? What words do others use when they describe success?" As students respond aloud, record each word or phrase on the board (or overhead or flipchart). Use a tally mark to indicate repeated terms. (5 min.)

4. When the list of responses has been exhausted, ask students to share as a large group. Invite students to identify words with positive connotations (such as "persistence," "hard work," "choice"), and words with negative connotations (such as "failure," "obstacle," "mistake"). Ask them why words with negative connotations would be included in a definition of success and ask them how the positive words connect to the negative ones (e.g., "It takes hard work to overcome an obstacle."). Ask students to share whether they marked any quotes as "favorites," referenced by the number on the quote pages. Identify the authors of these quotes and note whether other students identified the same quotes as favorites. Have students explain why they chose a quotation as a favorite. (5 min.)

5. Next, post the following prompt on the board or overhead, and invite them to respond in their journal (or on paper): "Many students come to college to be a 'success.' Yet few have given great thought to what they mean by the term. In a letter written to the others in this room, offer your personal definition of success." Encourage them to include not only their overall personal definition of success, but also at least one specific way they wish to experience success as a student. For inspiration, they may choose to use some of their favorite key terms that were recorded on the board. (15 min.)

6. Pair students and have them share and discuss their definitions with a partner. (5 min.)

7. Ask the whole group, "What common themes of success did you find when sharing your definitions with your partner? What specific successes do you want to experience as a student?" End by distributing a handout of all of the quotes used in the lesson for each of the students to take with them. (5 min.)

EXPERIENCES

My experiences conducting this lesson have been similar with both college and pre-college students. When asked at the beginning of the lesson to comment about "success," students remain relatively vague and general. "Success is graduating from college---getting a degree," is a common response. "Success is reaching a goal or accomplishing something; it is getting what you want."

During the silent reading time, students at first seem intent on reading every quotation word for word at first, but as the activity progresses, they scan the quote sheets more quickly looking for key terms to jot down. I often observe students pointing out favorite quotes to their neighbors or (despite my request for silence) uttering an occasional, "I really like this one!" When a conversation starts to intensify over a particular quote, I remind the students that they will have time later to share ideas. Without fail, a quote by Oprah Winfrey ("No matter how diligent or persistent you have been, there is not one of us who made this journey toward success by ourselves.") has elicited an audible comment every time I've conducted the lesson!

When I invite students to report key terms for me to record, they are usually eager to blurt out their findings. It doesn't take long to fill a board with adjectives, nouns, verbs, and phrases. Students occasionally like to interject "why" they chose those terms, even if I don't specifically ask them to do so. It is easy to find a naturally timed moment to point out the presence of words with both negative and positive connotations and to begin a conversation about how the two groups are connected in the scope of success.

Students often display excitement and energy when we reveal numbers of "favorite" and "most meaningful" quotes and commonalities are discovered. Adrenaline is flowing by the time I ask students to begin writing (journaling) about their own definitions of success, and when I ask them to begin sharing with a partner, they are most willing to do so.

Every time I have repeated this lesson (at least a dozen times in the past several years), students have found common goals of success within their particular learning communities.

OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, ideas are flowing and students demonstrate a better foundation upon which to build their concept of success. There is a notable contrast between the initial vague definitions that the students shared prior to our class activities and those they articulate after having this opportunity to think more critically about what success means to them. Here are some definitions of success that students have written at the end of this activity:

"Success is taking a dream and making it your reality. Success is feeling great about what you have done when you have figured out a way to overcome barriers. It is living life to the fullest!"

"Success means that I have determination and loyalty to myself while becoming the best person I can be. My life is full of opportunities and commitments. My success depends on how successful I want to be."

"Success is about having passion and dedication for something that holds a special place in your heart; it's about wanting it and going for it, even if everyone else is doing something different."

"Success is not only about overcoming obstacles, it is about how much you learn about yourself in the end. Success is the opportunity to believe in oneself in order to achieve a dream/goal with true happiness within."

"Success is being able to get to a higher point in your life. In order to find success, you must be willing to make changes. Success doesn't come overnight---you must be patient. Even if no one believes in your vision, there must be self-confidence within you."

"Success entails having a positive outlook and good work ethic to help you pursue your dreams and goals throughout your entire life. Success is achieving intellectual growth for your own personal enrichment. Success is making the best of the opportunities that are presented to us in order to do good things for ourselves and for those around us."

When I used the lesson in a Summer Bridge experience for college-bound high school juniors and seniors, I received positive reports from the language arts teachers. They shared that the definition writing experience provided a good foundation for their own lessons when delving into strategies for successful writing, because students had recently explored and personalized the concept of "success" for themselves.

It is apparent that the students build community within the framework of this lesson. They tend to remember individual goals shared by classmates, especially if they were common to their own, and they will refer to them in class discussions at later times in the semester.

LESSONS LEARNED

This strategy is one that has become a favorite in my classes, and it is easy to implement once the quote sheets are created. It is very easy to adapt the lesson to other topics and essay questions using quotes centered on different themes, such as "habits" or "making changes."

I modified this activity slightly when using it with high school students in a Summer Bridge Program. The students were seated at tables in groups of four, so instead of moving them into a circle for the activity, I allowed them to circulate the quote sheets around their table and pass the stack to the next table when all were finished viewing them. I noticed that the more reluctant learners would observe others reading at their table and taking notes, then they would begin to do the same. I have also done it this way in a workshop setting where participants are grouped together for a one-time experience.

SOURCES

The writing prompt in Step 5 comes from the On Course text's facilitator's manual, Chapter 1: "Getting On Course to Your Success."

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