

TRUE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: ACADEMICS AT THE ARTHUR MORGAN SCHOOL

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In 1972, my mother was arrested at the University of Kentucky for protesting the practices of a strip mining company. She had traveled to the eastern part of the state to discover for herself how strip mining was affecting the land, and the people she met took her in and told her about their lives. Her experiences there helped form her beliefs, and since then, she has defended her hillbilly heritage with passion and tried to impart some of this understanding to me along the way.

Raised by such a radical hillbilly woman, I have heard in detail about the horrors of strip mining and the oppressive influence of coal companies over the Appalachian people who live in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. I thought I had a pretty good understanding of the impact strip mining has on the land and the people who live there, but I didn't fully comprehend what my mother has been fighting for until this past month, when I went on an AMS field trip to West Virginia.

Every year, students gear up to go on field trips and are concerned about the amount of money they will have to buy junk food or how much beef jerky they will have to supplement the vegetarian diet for 18 days. When asked about their experiences on trips, they recount stories of stink bombs in the van or going to stores on Bourbon Street. It can sometimes be a challenge to glean stories from their mouths that sound like a true educational experience, and you may wonder whether what they are learning will help them succeed in the future.

Over the years, our academic program has changed with the constant influx of creative and inspirational teachers, but the philosophy of providing experiential learning opportunities in a compassionate community setting has never changed. Field trips are a crucial part of our unique curriculum at AMS, although they may be regarded by many as non-academic in nature.

In my own search to discover what is considered appropriate curriculum for middle school age students, I have been reading books promoted or published by The National Middle School Association. I have been impressed to find that the research and reports about middle level education overwhelmingly support the kind of curriculum our school provides, reinforcing the validity of educational experiences like field trips.

The authors of *This We Believe* (2003), a philosophical position paper published by the National Middle School Association, emphasize that successful middle schools should provide curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory. They write, "To most, curriculum refers to the content and skills to be covered in courses. In developmentally responsive middle level schools, however, curriculum embraces every planned aspect of a school's educational program."

Trudy Knowles and Dave Brown also refer to this belief in their book, What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know (2000), and they go on to say, "The middle school curriculum must touch on those issues that concern young adolescents and help them construct meaning about themselves, their world, and their future."

In response to interests and concerns raised by both staff and students who wanted to discover how our energy systems work, the "Power Trip" was created. We traveled to see coal burning power plants, wind farms, the Oak Ridge nuclear facility, intentional communities using alternative energy systems, and the coal fields of West Virginia.

In West Virginia, we were led to a cemetery surrounded by mountaintop removal sites, and we listened to the stories of women who had been living in the valleys below these operations. For me, the impact of hearing those stories first hand and seeing the immense destruction mountaintop removal is causing was a



learning experience far greater than hearing my mother recount the tale of her arrest or her travels to eastern Kentucky.

How much can we learn from listening to someone else's experiences and passions? Quite a bit, I bet most of us would say. Our favorite teachers are the ones who are most passionate about the subject they teach. But to see the harsh realities of mountaintop removal for ourselves, to touch the "reclamation sites" with our hands and feel the loose scree, to meet people whose homes and air are being destroyed—this was all more than any book or passionate teacher could have taught us.

The work we are doing here at AMS—the curriculum that we believe in providing for our students—is intensely relevant and exploratory. What students will take with them for the rest of their lives are the people they met on these field trips and the places they saw. They will remember the soot that came off of their hands from touching coal, and they will use these experiences to make choices in the future.

In the entirety of our curriculum, we strive to engage in real learning as teachers and students. Our classes, work projects, outdoor trips, home life, and service learning all play roles in challenging students to think critically about the world around them. At AMS, we aren't simply teaching children to solve hypothetical problems in a classroom; we are raising them to explore questions, discover their world, and find solutions to problems.



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