

Making Field Trips Matter

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[Note: This was written for a middle school magazine, but the principles apply to high school and elementary school fieldtrips as well. It was written over a decade ago, so the online sources may or may not be available still. I'd be happy to talk with readers of the article about any of its content, if that would be helpful. Use rick@rickwormeli.onmicrosoft.com to contact me. – Rick Wormeli]

“Okay, everyone,” the parent chaperone said to her group of five sixth grade students walking through the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum Annex located outside of Washington, D.C. “Look sharp. We’re trying to find an old fighter plane with a cartoon shark’s mouth on the front cowling. It’s number three on the list.” She waved the scavenger hunt sheet provided by the sixth grade team and given to every student as well.

“Hey, number seven asks what time Charles Lindbergh’s watch stopped,” said 12 year-old Rishi. “I see his flight suit in that glass case over there. It might have it.”

“Good thinking, Rishi,” said the parent. “Let’s check it out on the way to the fighter planes.”

T.J called out, “Look over there. That plane is painted like a yellow cab. Number 13 asks us to find the plane that looks like a taxi. That has to be it.” His classmates quickly race to the display panel near the guard rail and record the name of the plane in the blank next to #13.

“You guys are doing really well,” their chaperone beamed. “We’re going to be finished with the entire scavenger hunt in fifteen minutes.”

Several students nodded in excitement. One turned to the parent, however, and asked, “But we don’t have to be back to the buses for another two hours. What are we supposed to do until then?”

Everyone looked toward the parent, and she paused, eyeing the classroom teachers gathered together drinking coffee in the museum snack bar over-looking the display floor. “Uh...I’m not sure,” she said slowly, then brightened and looked at her charges. “But I know we can think of something to fill the time. If you see something interesting let us know.”

“How about the IMAX movie?” Alec asked.

“That costs money, Alec,” said Clarissa. “Not everybody has money.”

Several students looked hopefully at their chaperone. “Don’t look at me, guys,” the parent said. “I don’t have enough for everyone. Let’s get back to the scavenger hunt and see if we can finish before everyone else.” She ushers them away from the taxi plane to the next display. “Who can find a missile that has a name from Greek or Roman mythology?”

This conversation occurred during a real field trip conducted last school year. When asked later about the purpose of this field trip, the sixth grade team leader said it supported the new science curriculum on which students were being tested this year. When asked to identify the science concepts and facts students were supposed to learn on the trip, the team leader was silent.

Let's be clear: This was an inappropriate field trip for a middle school to conduct. It was a, "Where's Waldo?" experience that did not advance students' understanding of a single science principle. It was much more of a history tour, and one that lacked meaning at that.

One eighth grade team I know took 155 8th graders to the zoo, a place most of them have frequented throughout their childhood. When they arrived at 10:30 a.m., teachers instructed students to keep in pairs, stay out of trouble, and to be back at the buses in three hours. There were no curriculum connections, docent presentations, or behind-the-scenes tours. Zoo personnel were now the childcare providers. Some of the teachers sat on a "home-base if you need help" bench near the zoo entrance, while others strolled through the many acres of displays. When asked afterwards about the purpose of the trip, the team-leader responded, "It was getting near the end of the year and we hadn't spent our bus money for field trips. The kids wanted to do something, and this seemed like the easiest thing to do."

Unfortunately, trips like this one are more common than some of us realize. It's time to change that. Middle school field trips must matter. They should be done only if the experience cannot be provided on the school's campus. The trips should be very important to the school's twin missions: teaching the curriculum and facilitating student growth. Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools says that field trips should be considered, "*...a living laboratory in which learning is acquired through active hands-on experience with the rich resources of the local community.*" They add that field trip research proves that field trips: "*increase student knowledge and understanding of a subject,*" "*add realism to the topic of study,*" and "*provide an opportunity to develop and*

enhance a student's socialization and citizenship skills.” (taken from www.mcps.k12.md.us/curriculum/socialstd/FT/Field_Trip_start).

A quick scavenger hunt at a museum dedicated to flight history does not result in science (or any other curriculum) learning that makes the trip worthy of scarce school resources. Where was the focus on gravity, thrust, propulsion, Bernoulli’s principle, air pressure, air as mass, air behaving as fluid, curvature of the wing to create lift, and the myriad of compelling flight-related science principles likely to be found in our science curriculum and on state exams?

How might we pump up the relevance of the trip and meaningful engagement of students? Here are a few ideas:

- Set up times for each student group to be with a docent or interpreter for the major exhibits. This would give students the backstory they needed to appreciate what they were seeing.
- Ask students to research historical figures in history whose work and flying machines were on display at the museum. This would provide a personal experience for them when they viewed the exhibits.
- Invite a member of NASA, nearby Washington Dulles International Airport, and/or the Airline Pilots’ Association to join the students and explain some of the basic flight principles involved in getting planes, rockets, and helicopters off the ground.
- Ask students to watch one of the more scientific or historical IMAX films and process its content afterwards.

- Ask students to use the principles learned during the trip to create their own flying machines.
- Guide students in their observation of flight history, then ask them to extrapolate about the future of manned flight.
- Guide students as they note parallels among the evolution of flight, technology, and our society
- Guide students as they explore flight evolution's impact on commerce, government, communication, and diplomacy.

Field trip timing is important, too. The science field trip above was conducted on the Friday afternoon before the school district's extended winter holiday. When asked why the trip was held on a day when a number of students were already going to be out of school as their families left early for vacation, the team leader said that it was a day on which students were very excitable and wouldn't be paying attention to much of anything anyway. Since they wouldn't get much done in school, they decided to do this trip instead.

If a field trip is "skippable" by some students without major impact on their education, we need to reconsider its appropriateness. Middle school field trips should be conducted on days when we can maximize the number of student participants and when students are very attentive. It is a waste of school time, money, and personnel to conduct a field trip on a day when students are likely to be absent or their minds are pulled in other directions. These trips are important enough to warrant the removal of every potentially experience-diluting factor. If band students are attending a band competition,

for example, that's not the time to take the rest of our students to the state capitol. If it's the day before Spring Break, we don't ask students to be out of school, shadowing professionals for Career Day. With such ineffective field trip planning and implementation, we deserve any public outcry that may come our way.

If we need substantive, compelling last-day-before-the-holiday activities, consider exploring and extending content knowledge by: debating interesting topics, conducting Poetry Slams, watching student presentations, filming a video, doing simulations, asking students to make speeches, doing service learning, using more fine and performing arts, playing review games, designing Websites, and putting on performances for other classes or grade levels.

Some teachers and schools are so focused on state exams, they don't allow students to do outdoor field trips like Ropes Courses (Project Adventure) in the few months prior to the exam. "We don't have one day to waste," they claim.

I could not disagree more. In fact, outdoor-education, problem-solving experiences will do more for students and their test scores than cramming in 10 more pages of their test-preparation workbooks would ever do. Inhaling great volumes of non-re-circulated, non-institutional air, frequently working bones, muscles and joints, getting oxygen and nutrients to the brain, learning to think flexibly, laughing, analyzing problems then negotiating with others on how to solve them, and summoning the courage to take risks and later being affirmed for doing so all have direct, positive impact on academic performance. Students return from such experiences more relaxed, open, thoughtful, and focused. During the angst-ridden days of test preparation is the exact

time when such trips are needed, especially for students teachers most worry about: English-as-a-Second-Language and learning disabled learners.

As we plan field trips for this year, consider whether or not the experience **provides**:

- ample hands-on activities
- meaningful interaction with content
- vivid, real experiences
- opportunities for students to grow or learn in some significant way

The trip **should** be:

- strongly connected to the school's mission
- done a day on which most students will be present and attentive to the content of the experience
- conducted only if students have been prepared for the experience, i.e. they've studied the topic, they've been given the backstory for what they will see or hear, they appreciate what they are about to experience, they understand their purpose in going

If these attributes are missing from your field trip, don't go. You better serve students continuing your lessons back in the classroom. In addition, a field trip **should not** be conducted if it is something that:

- can be provided back on the school's campus
- students have done already in their childhood

Great field trip experiences for middle schoolers include, but are not limited to: Journeys to interview or hear someone of historical significance, museums and galleries in which students get serious background and interaction opportunities with experts or docents, outdoor education programs in which students engage in nature study and interaction in meaningful ways – often with an interpreter or geologist or naturalist, off-campus simulations such as Civil War re-enactments, musical and cultural performances, “shadowing” experiences with professionals, service learning opportunities, academic/music/sports competitions, behind-the-scenes tours, hands-on craftwork, work with primary research sources, and major events in the community.

If you're looking for some truly engaging and substantive field trips beyond just your community, consider professional field trip operators. Here is a partial list of field trip operators with which I've had positive experiences, or about which I've talked with participants who report very positive experiences:

www.spacecamp.com

www.ushmm.org (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

www.EFAmerica.com

www.cha-tours.com

www.acis.com

www.worldstrides.com

www.educationaltours.com

www.holbrooktravel.com

www.fieldtripfactory.com

Note that mentioning these operators is not an NMSA or personal endorsement of any one of them. The list is just a launching point for those of you curious about extending the power of your field trips. The wise teacher checks out all the details: some of these operators can't guarantee availability of particular tours during hurricane season, some limit the number of students who can attend any one trip, some times/days are not available, some require fees to be paid in full a year ahead of time, or the ratio of teachers to students may be different. On the other hand, some operators will allow teachers to go free while accompanying students, and some will even provide free phone cards for participants when traveling overseas. Always read the fine print, and have a trusted colleague read it as well.

If there is no budget for off-campus experiences, consider using virtual field trips. Many of them are fantastic. Most large museums, for example, have a significant portion of their artifacts scanned in three-dimensional images, ready for you to download for your students. Some research scientists and archeologists allow classes to connect with them while they are in the field conducting research. Do an Internet search on "Virtual field trips" to get a sense of what's out there ready to be projected on the front classroom screen.

Middle schools are significant and serious institutions of learning focused on academics and student growth. We are charged with teaching diverse and transitioning individuals a massive curriculum that rarely fits within the school calendar. We can't afford to waste one day that does not advance our cause. Field trips can have dramatic impact on student learning. We should take advantage of that fact and provide substantive trips that matter, conducted on days that will likely lead to real learning.

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