

Adventures with the Audubon Expedition Institute

Tina Fields

Students and teachers live, sleep, eat, and travel together. A hand-made bumper sticker hangs on the ceiling of one bus, “If the students lead, the faculty will follow.” Audubon Expedition Institute (AEI) is a radical and accredited college program where I taught as field faculty for the last four and a half years.

AEI is a traveling college program, where students and faculty live together in an intense learning community for a 13-week semester, with some students attending for three semesters or even more. Although affiliated with Lesley University in Massachusetts, we do not have a campus.

Students and faculty alike travel in a modified school bus, which serves as transportation, storage, and central metaphor, while sleeping outdoors in open air or in tents. Students cook in rotating teams on a propane stove. The faculty not only teaches, they also drive the bus and practice any needed wilderness medicine. Aside from visits to specific locales, the classroom remains almost entirely outdoors: sleeping, cooking, course-work, discussions, reading, and writing.

Sometimes, this transpires in wilderness areas we backpack or canoe into, while other instances will find us immersed in a big city like Boston studying environmental justice issues with inner city youths as our teachers and guides. We learn by listening to locals, both human and non-human.

It is not only a low-tech environment, in most cases, it is no-tech. Aside from cameras and watches, most buses do not allow any sort of electronic mediation between ourselves and what’s happening at the moment.

All of the learning community members, faculty and students alike, agree to go without TVs, computers, radios, or walkpersons for the short duration of the bus semesters. If one wants to write, they use a pencil and paper.

If you want to read, the bus is stocked with a 500-volume library on a variety of topics such as ecological, sustainable living, anthropology, cookbooks, plus folders full of information on specific regions we’re traveling through, campgrounds, local flora and fauna, people we’ve met there before, and the issues they face.

For music, the bus has instruments: at least one guitar, often a banjo or mandolin, percussion instruments, and of course, all the voices that came with our bodies. We sing for fun and at times we sing ritually, such as upon leaving a special place or before a meal as a form of gratitude. I count group singing as a litmus test of community dynamics: if people spontaneously sing together during evenings or in the bus on long drives, things are going well.

There are times when students rebel against the prohibition against electronic doodads, generally at the beginning of the semester when withdrawal symptoms start to kick in. If this happens, we have a long group discussion about it, in which everyone’s voice is heard and feelings are respected, although the policy does stand. “This is one of the few times in many peoples’ lives when they will not have their experience mediated by technological contrivances—in the case of very young people, who’ve grown up with computers, it may be the first and only time.

In such a gadget-free environment, we turn to one another for resolving troubles, for entertainment, and for appreciating our inner beauty as well.

The AEI structures are remarkably egalitarian, especially when compared to most accredited university settings. Decisions are largely made by group consensus-and this skill is taught and practiced as part of the curriculum.

The course holding the largest number of credits is the “Learning Communities” course, which involves decision-making, conflict resolution, group and outdoor leadership skills.

AEI relies largely on a style known as “midwife teaching,” a pedagogical approach with a deep belief in the student’s core wisdom, instead of cramming the assumed empty head full of outside ideas and testing the amount later. AEI students get to choose which books they read for each course, which topics they want to take charge of for the group’s learning, and other individualized choices (including a third-semester group consensus project involving some form of specific activism)-where the agenda concerns nothing less than a radical shift in consciousness, towards a more ecologically sane and sustainable society.

We give each other seminars on environmental literacy, anarcho-primitivism, the alternate version of the Columbus story, the effects of globalization on fishing families off the coast of Maine, what it’s like for a pig on a factory farm, the effects of cattle grazing on desert ecology, WalMart’s insidious practices.

We create street theater pieces to protest globalization, or circulate petitions near outdoor stores to get them to use organic cotton. We join with local communities for contra dances, hootenannies, and Native American ceremonies. We notice it getting darker at 4 pm, how it’s impossible to get everything done on our schedule as the days grow shorter, and we sleep under the stars, listening to screech owls.

We also practice “service learning,” moving woodpiles under shelter for the winter, digging an outhouse hole, making biodiesel, clearing brush, or killing select trees to clear land for a community center.

And, we discuss the ethical ramifications of actions like, as one student put it, “killing someone’s dreams (those of the young trees we pulled up or sawed off) to help create another dream.” As students and faculty discover the deep complexity of our involvement, we become the living experience of being a fully participating global citizen.

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