

Mining

"What I love about our students is that there is so much to mine out of them. They're not used to valuing education, or thinking that they have intelligent things to say, but it's in there..."

This is my answer to the question I hear a lot these days: "What do you like about teaching?"

It's true. Our students are at a wonderful crossroads in their education, where they can decide to complete an associate's degree and begin careers, or they can transfer to a 4-year college and earn a bachelor's degree. No matter what they choose, they are very often accomplishing more than they, their parents, and many of their teachers thought possible.

I'm not sure when I first compared teaching to mining, but I can't think of a more apt way to describe it. What makes mining unique is that it's not a guaranteed success - you can fail. This doesn't mean the precious metals or diamonds or rock salts aren't there - it just means sometimes you don't find them. What I also love about being a miner is that each site is different. Some sites yield sparkling diamonds; others yield coal. Regardless, you go into a mine looking for something. And often, you have to shake things up to find it.

According to my very brief online research of mining, "Modern mining processes involve prospecting for ore bodies, analysis of the profit potential of a proposed mine, extraction of the desired materials and finally reclamation of the land to prepare it for other uses once the mine is closed." What a concept! To prepare it for other uses once the mine is closed...to prepare you for other endeavors once you leave school...to prepare your mind to think critically in all facets of your life after this class. Finding the gem, mineral, or lump of coal is indeed exhilarating (in my classroom I will shout, "That's a win for teaching!"), but after a period of time the site closes and the land has to be able to do something else. It can't be left deserted, drying in the sun with the entrance boarded up, a place where once something wonderful was found. But it will be left this way, unless the student decides to put the land to another use, to find a valuable and meaningful purpose for the site. To recognize that their minds need to constantly be illuminated, shaken, panned, and

excavated. To know that what they say, think, and believe has meaning, and will have meaning for as long as they allow themselves to go through the processes of removing bedrock, stripping away vegetation, enduring painful digging, explosion, and sometimes, accidents that set them back.

Unfortunately, not every mine yields a pocketful of gemstones. Some students continue to yield nothing but dust, dust that infiltrates the air and infects the miners and coats other surfaces so that it becomes hard to tell if something is struggling to shine from under the layers of dust, grime, and sediment. But as long as the mine is open, as long as a miner is granted entry in some capacity, the task is to continue to try: strap on the helmet and the headlamp, pack up the tools, and start looking.

The challenge is not to lose heart. Often I leave a site at the end of the day thinking that if only I'd struck the wall at a different angle, or used a sharper tool, or panned a little more gently, surely the gems would have come falling out like colorful, sparkling raindrops. Other times I leave with dirt under my fingernails and a handful of coal that I know I should be grateful for, but the longer I look at it, the blacker, dustier, and uglier it looks. How will this site ever be prepared for another use? How will it ever be more than just a messy, toxic, eroding hole in the ground?

I suppose like anything that means anything, it demands more faith than most people think they have: faith that if the mine is open, something is inside. Faith that if I was hired to mine, then surely somebody believes I'm capable of finding something down there. Faith that when I see a glimmer in the darkness, my job is to stay and dig and dig and dig and dig until I reach it. Faith that when this happens, it is as joyous for the mine as it is the miner.

I have to believe - as all teachers have to believe - that the discovery of precious gems in a mine is enough to inspire it for the future, to prepare it for life as a valuable mine, to help it recognize that its very potential makes it beautiful.