

The Arts of Life and the Moraine Park School, 1916-1927

Joseph Watras
University of Dayton

According to Diane Ravitch, the reforms brought about by educational progressivism contained strains of anti-intellectualism that led school teachers to ignore academic subject matters and to pay attention to every perceived need except the obligation to organize human knowledge. She believed this harmed students because, without reasonable intellectual training, they could not understand the human experience.¹

Although Ravitch does not mention the first president of the Progressive Education Association, Arthur Ernest Morgan, his educational ideas suggest that Ravitch was overly critical of the movement for progressive education. Morgan was an engineer who had little formal education. Although he complained that traditional schools did not prepare children for the rough and tumble of life, he founded a school in Dayton, Ohio and he served as president of Antioch College from 1920 to 1936. Instead of condemning academics, he sought ways those subjects could be taught that helped children master what he called the arts of life.

In 1916, Morgan came to Dayton, Ohio to serve as chief engineer of the Miami Conservancy District. Three years earlier, Dayton had been inundated with flood waters. Determined not to let another deluge harm business and manufacturing, city leaders formed the Conservancy to build a system to control the rivers that ran through the city.

When Morgan moved his family to Dayton, he joined a reading group with some of the business leaders who supported the work of the Conservancy such as Charles F. Kettering of General Motors Research; Edward A. Deeds, who had worked with Kettering and headed the Conservancy; Orville Wright, one of the inventors of the airplane; and Fred Rike, a department store owner. After reading and discussing books that criticized schools for being overly academic, these men decided to open a school for their boys that would prepare them for college while teaching them to succeed in the practical world. The men hoped that the children would learn academic skills while developing commercial habits and ways of thinking.²

The plan these men formed was for the children to run their own small businesses, keep track of their expenses, fulfill the obligations they incurred, and reinvest the profits they made. To keep the business enterprises going, the children would have to master the academic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The hope was that, in the process, the students would develop the personal qualities of responsibility, independence, and cooperation.³

Such an idea made sense to men with little formal education who had made fortunes. For example, Kettering and Deeds had developed the starter motor while tinkering in a barn. Although Morgan gained prominence as an engineer capable of extensive dam construction, his education consisted of eleven years in what he called a frontier school.

These men ran businesses and hired young people who had graduated from schools.

Morgan complained that the graduates of liberal arts colleges had no vocational skills and the students from vocational schools lacked an appreciation of culture. He wanted to start a school where students could learn both aspects of life. For Morgan, this was the utilitarian dream that he pursued all his life. He held a vision of life in a democratic society composed of proprietors of small businesses. He wanted to prepare students for such a world by having them engage in business enterprises where they would acquire the personal and academic skills they needed. By participating in school governance, they would learn citizenship skills. From the companionship of careful teachers, they would come to appreciate the importance of social responsibility.⁴

Morgan wrote many of these ideas on a flyer that he sent through out the country soliciting applications for a headmaster to run the school. He wrote that the school would have six to twelve boys with normal intelligence and good bodily health as students and their ages would be from ten to twelve years. More than 2500 candidates applied in response. When Morgan traveled around the country for his engineering firm, he interviewed several of the applicants.

In addition, Morgan sent his flyers to noted educators. Many of these prominent professionals sent letters lending support to Morgan's plan for the school. Among these respondents was Charles W. Eliot, then former president of Harvard. In 1893, Eliot had chaired the Committee of Ten commissioned by the National Educational Association to determine how high school programs could facilitate students' transitions to colleges. Although the Committee of Ten had recommended that all students pursue academic courses, Eliot was so enamored of Morgan's idea to teach academics through practical business activities that he became a member of the board of trustees when Morgan took on the presidency of Antioch College. In 1921, Morgan transplanted to the college in Yellow Springs, Ohio the idea from the Moraine Park School of education through practical activities.⁵

The search for a headmaster ended on 7 February 1917 when Morgan hired Frank Durward Slutz, then superintendent of schools at Pueblo, Colorado to run the school. Like Morgan, Slutz disapproved of excessive academic study. For example, in answering a questionnaire that Morgan sent to the applicants, Slutz admitted he did not spend much time reading and studying. Since he was a busy man, he carried books with him so that he could read short passages when he had spare moments. Rather than write articles, he added that he devoted his time to public speaking.

In April 1917, two months later, the supporters met with Morgan. In their discussions, they changed the nature of the school. The problem was that two of the supporters had young daughters. If the school remained a school for boys,

these men would support an institution that their children could not attend. This was true for Morgan because, at the time, he had a young daughter, Francis, as well as an older son, Ernest. After considerable discussion, the supporters decided that the school would open as a single sex school for boys. Girls could be admitted to a primary division that would begin later. They could work their ways through the grades until the school was coeducational.⁶

In June 1917, the Moraine Park School opened in Delco Dell Community. For classrooms, Charles Kettering donated a greenhouse 225 feet long and 50 feet wide that he had planned to use for experiments on photosynthesis. The school's directors hired carpenters to lay flooring and build partitions to make the greenhouse suitable for a school.⁷

Named after the moraine, an accumulation of rocks deposited by a glacier, on which the school stood, Moraine Park School was four miles south of the city of Dayton fifty feet from a trolley, or electric traction, line. Despite the proximity of public transportation, the travel turned out to be a problem because the directors built a new house in the city for the young children. Further, when the students grew older, some of them organized a taxi service as one of the business projects they managed.

Although the school opened with 33 boys and two teachers, it quickly expanded. By September 1917, the school opened the primary division with 24 children spread unevenly through kindergarten to grade six and two more teachers.

According to some of the early public statements, the curriculum was to consist of a sort of project plan. Each student would select some business enterprise such as raising chickens or using wireless telegraphy. The hope was that these projects would hold the students' interests to such an extent that they could serve as mediums of instruction. To keep the number and the type of full time teachers and the school's equipment at a minimum, the directors hoped that local stores, factories, or airfields would offer assistance with the projects to the students.⁸

The idea of organizing the school curriculum around projects was popular in the years surrounding World War I. The idea had gained prominence when the Massachusetts Board of Education adopted the model for agricultural education in 1911. In 1918, William Heard Kilpatrick gained national fame by writing an article explaining the ways that the project method could be used to organize all types of schools.

In his search for headmaster, Morgan visited Columbia University where he met Kilpatrick. During the visit, Morgan hired a student of Kilpatrick's, Laura A. Gillmore, to be the director of the primary division of Moraine Park School. Kilpatrick told Morgan that, when he read the flyer advertising for a headmaster, he had found the outline of the Moraine Park School to be unusually interesting.⁹

With the growing popularity of the project method, people warmly received Morgan's ideas. On receiving a copy of the flyer advertising the need of a headmaster, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Ellery Sedgwick, asked Morgan to write an article for his magazine entitled "Education: The

Mastery of the Arts of Life." Morgan accepted the offer and his article appeared in 1918.

In his article, Morgan noted that social conditions had made it difficult for children to engage in real work where they learned important social skills. At the same time, he asserted that most schools forced children to pour over books and to close their eyes to the wonders of nature, literature, and art. To Morgan, the answer was for educators to relate academic skills to practical affairs. In this way, the schools could regain a balance that modern life made difficult.¹⁰

If Morgan wanted projects to help students become more attentive to nature, literature, and art, the activities at the Moraine Park School did not fulfill this hope. During the first year, the students in the senior division engaged in eighteen different projects that expressed a limited range of interests. These included forming a bank for student funds, setting up a store to sell school supplies, and establishing a print shop for school publications.¹¹

While the idea of the projects as business enterprises was the unique aspect of Moraine Park School, this model seemed to prevent the students from following aesthetic orientations. For example, in the academic year 1923-1924, the school employed a full time faculty member to coordinate the projects in the senior division. According to this supervisor, students tended to engage in merchandising projects. The supervisor added that, although the students learned about businesses, they tended not to devote attention to art, literature, or music. Further, the supervisor noted that the projects tended to serve the school rather than the community.¹²

On the other hand, the primary division included more artistic and literary projects than did the senior division. The director of the primary division, Laura Gillmore, had worked in the Horace Mann School at Columbia University in New York City, before accepting Morgan's offer to move to Dayton. In the annual bulletins of Moraine Park School, she used the words of her teacher, Kilpatrick, to describe the projects her young students. When Kilpatrick defined the project method, he included such things as consumer projects wherein students attended museums and concerts. Consequently, Gillmore had students in the primary division engaging in artistic endeavors that had far fewer practical applications than did the printing shop of the senior division.

Shortly after the Moraine Park opened, the directors constructed a new building for Gillmore's junior division in a fashionable residential section in the center of Dayton. Shaped like the letter V, each wing contained two classrooms. In the center were a library, a living room, a kitchen, and a shop. Attached to each wing were porches that the students could enter through sliding doors when they wanted to do quiet work. Such a setting encouraged the young children to read books, draw pictures, and engage in conversation. They made play houses and constructed furniture.¹³

In 1920-1921, the older women students from the junior division moved to Moraine Park School to attend classes with the boys. For the girls, the trustees had built a separate cottage with a living room, a dining room, study,

nursery, and bath. According to the teachers, the separate facilities enabled the girls to study without being distracted by boys who gazed at them. Further, the girls learned home management skills in maintaining the cottage.¹⁴

It is not clear how much value the students placed on home making. In one bulletin, a young girl in the elementary division wrote that the exercises in cooking had not done her much good. She explained that her family had a cook.¹⁵

Although the work in Moraine Park School followed lines considered sexist today, the female students took part in school governance on an apparently equal footing. When the school began, the students adopted a form of government that mirrored the city manager form of administration then newly adopted in Dayton. In this style, the students elected three commissioners. The candidate with the most votes became the mayor. The commission appointed a manager who appointed the heads of such departments as the Department of Safety to enforce the rules, the Department of Finance to levy student fees that supported school activities, and the Department of Recreation that planned student excursions. During the first year that women students attended the senior division, a girl campaigned to become one of the commissioners. She won her office and, according to her teachers, served admirably.¹⁶

While the business enterprises were the mainstay of the curriculum, Moraine Park School offered some traditional studies and activities. Latin students read Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, and the students formed athletic teams to play other schools. Although the students claimed their teams fared well in competition, they sought to approach sports democratically. Instead of recruiting the strongest or most agile students, every student had a chance to play. The aim in these athletic contests was to help students to gain physical strength. It was not to enhance school pride or team spirit.

Articles in national magazines made clear that the Moraine Park School focused on the development of skills necessary for owning and running a small business. Although preparation for college and the development of physical health were important aspects of life, they served the more practical orientation.

For example, in July 1921, Theodore Knappen wrote an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled, "Mastering the Arts of Life as exemplified in a New School." Building on Morgan's earlier article, Knappen claimed the arts of life were the ten occupations that he found in the report cards issued by Moraine Park School: body-building, spirit-building, society-serving, man-conserving, opinion-forming, truth-discovering, thought-expressing, wealth-producing, and comrade-seeking. Although Knappen acknowledged that this list did not represent the ordinary way people thought about occupations, he thought they were departments of human activity that made up life. Most important to Knappen, he found that these categories on the report card told the story of Moraine Park School because teachers approached the academic subject matters in ways to enhance the students' abilities in these areas, and the students undertook projects to gain practical skills.¹⁷

As Moraine Park School gained national attention, Morgan became an important educational leader. In 1921, Morgan won the presidency of the Progressive Education Association. The association had been formed in 1919 with Charles W. Eliot as the honorary president. The organization dedicated itself to use science to free students from external constraints and to foster their growth as much as possible. Until the 1930s, the members of this organization tended to come from small private schools. During the Great Depression, though, the Progressive Education Association grew into one of the most important mainstream educational organizations maintaining this position until the 1950s when fell into public disfavor and ended. As president, Morgan arranged for the annual meeting to be held in Dayton so that members could visit the Moraine Park School.

At the dinner meeting of the convention, Mrs. Milan V. Ayers, secretary of the organization complimented Moraine Park School by observing that, if the Progressive Education Association had not started in the eastern states, it would have begun in Dayton. Although Ayers noted the reforms were similar, she pointed out an important difference. The new schools in the East were headed by women, such as Marietta Johnson, who worked with men, such as Eugene R. Smith. In Dayton, all of the trustees of the Moraine Park School were men. Although she acknowledged that the men in Dayton were intelligent, she added that women had different forms of intelligence. Since she believed these two types of intelligence should cooperate, she concluded that the masculine aspects of Moraine Park School could augment the feminine side of school reform found in the East.¹⁸

Although the teachers and the trustees contended that academic achievement and college success were not the primary aims of secondary education, Moraine Park School bulletins expressed pride in the accomplishments of its graduates. From 1917 to 1921, the school graduated ten students who went on to college. Claiming these students passed 89 percent of the college courses they took, the Moraine Park teachers boasted that this showed the practical curriculum could help students succeed in college and in life.

Despite the successes, the school depended on donations. In 1918, after one year of operation, the student body totaled 63 and the deficit was about \$2,700. In 1922, the enrollment reached a high of 206 students with a deficit of about \$8,400. In 1923, the enrollment dropped to 172 and the deficit climbed to \$20,000. Nonetheless, in that year, three trustees, John Patterson, Kettering, and Deeds, built a new gymnasium and a new shop for Moraine Park School.

On 16 February 1927, the *Dayton Journal* carried a story describing the unwillingness of two important benefactors, Charles Kettering and Edward Deeds, to continue supporting the Moraine Park School unless the citizens of Dayton showed an interest in maintaining the school by raising an endowment of \$50,000. The newspaper added that the committee of forty influential citizens had formed about three weeks earlier when Kettering and Deeds complained that citizens in Dayton had no interest in the school.

Slutz issued a prospectus for contributors to buy. He urged Dayton citizens to buy stock in Moraine Park School to show that they had faith in the school as an educational laboratory dedicated to the discovery of better educational methods. He sought assistance to turn Moraine Park School into a junior college and eventually into a city college. Listing accomplishments including the shop building completed in 1925, Slutz described the school as a training place for leaders who came from rich homes and from poor families. Slutz promised the school would continue to provide an education that made intellectual and spiritual interests paramount. Dayton newspapers carried full page stories about the wonders of Moraine Park School. Newspaper editorials praised Slutz as a local resource whose campaign for the growth of Moraine Park School deserved attention. Newspaper editors urged local citizens to attend to Slutz's pleas for the continued growth of his school.¹⁹

The campaign failed. The Moraine Park School student paper, *The Quadrant*, reported that two principal benefactors of the school had withdrawn support. In June 1927, Slutz sent a form letter to the parents stating that the school would close permanently at the end of the year.²⁰

Although the Moraine Park School was short lived, its story suggests that Ravitch overstated the differences between the progressive view of education and an intellectual approach. Reformers such as Morgan, Slutz, and Gillmore faced the problem of inculcating within the students an appreciation of the practical values of academic learning. Although Ravitch concluded that schools should emphasize the transmission of knowledge rather than the children's immediate experiences, she gave practical reasons for such an orientation. She claimed that public school teachers had to improve such academic abilities as the science and mathematics skills of their students for practical reasons. Without such knowledge, the children could not compete for the available opportunities. Morgan had similar practical orientations. He wanted schools to teach the students to manifest the personal qualities of resourcefulness, dependability, and social consciousness that he deemed necessary for success in business.²¹

In short, the claims that Ravitch made for academic studies were the qualities that Morgan wanted children to master as the arts of life. While Ravitch asserted that studies of history prevented children from repeating the mistakes of the past, Morgan wanted children to transfer information from history books to an understanding of civic administration. In Moraine Park School, the children learned citizenship skills by forming their own student government patterned on the city commission. In traditional academic circles, this might be considered an enrichment activity rather than an over emphasis on present experience.

Endnotes

¹ Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform* (New York: Touchstone Book, 2001), 16-18.

² Morgan to Lloyd Marcus, 29 September 1947, Arthur E. Morgan Papers, Moraine Park School Series, Antiochiana, Antioch College Library.

³ Arthur E. Morgan, *An Outline of a Proposed Boy's School for which a Headmaster or Teacher is Being Sought*, {1916?}, Morgan Papers.

⁴ Morgan, *An Outline of a Proposed Boy's School*; Roy Talbert, Jr., *Beyond Pragmatism: The Story of Arthur Morgan*, Masters Thesis, Vanderbilt University [1971?] Antiochiana Archives.

⁵ Charles W. Eliot to Morgan, 9 September 1916, Morgan papers; Morgan to Eliot 27 September 1916, Morgan Papers.

⁶ Notes on Meeting at Dayton Club, Boy's School, 13 April 1917, Morgan Papers.

⁷ Norma Bixler, "This Business of Education," *Kettering Digest: A Collection of Articles Commemorating Charles F. Kettering's 80th Birthday*, August 1956, Dayton collection Pamphlets, Dayton Metro Library, Dayton, Ohio.

⁸ "Statement of Progress," Moraine Park School, 3 May 1917, Morgan Papers.

⁹ William Heard Kilpatrick to Morgan, 4 June 1917, Morgan Papers; Morgan to Frank D. Slutz, 31 May 1917, Morgan Papers.

¹⁰ Arthur E. Morgan, "Education: The Mastery of the Arts of Life," *The Atlantic Monthly* 121 (March 1918): 337-339.

¹¹ Pupils of the School, *The Arts of Life, Moraine Park School, Dayton, Ohio, 1918-1919*, Morgan Papers.

¹² *The Projects: Moraine Park School, 1923-1924*, Moraine Park School Collection, Montgomery County Historical Society, Dayton, Ohio.

¹³ Frank D. Slutz and Laura A. Gillmore, *Moraine Park School, An Educational Laboratory*, Bulletin No. 5 (Washington, D.C. Progressive Education Association, April 1921).

¹⁴ Teachers of the School, *Self Measurements, Moraine Park School, 1920-1921*, Morgan Papers.

¹⁵ Pupils of the School, *The Arts of Life, Moraine Park School, 1918-1919*, Morgan Papers.

¹⁶ Frank Slutz, "An Experiment in Educational Engineering, handwritten [1917?], Morgan papers; Teachers of the School, *Self Measurements, 1920-1921*, Morgan Papers.

¹⁷ Theodore M. Knappen, "Mastering the Arts of Life as Exemplified in a New School," *Atlantic Monthly* 128 (July 1921): 87-96.

¹⁸ Mrs. Milan V. Ayers, "Record of the Morning Session of the Progressive Education Association Meeting," Engineers Club, Dayton, Ohio, 9 April 1921, Typescript, Morgan Papers.

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- ¹⁹ Moraine Park School, *A Prospectus*, [1925?], Moraine Park School Collection; “Engineering Science Plays Important Part in Child Training at Moraine Park School,” *The Dayton Journal*, n.d., Moraine Park School Collection; “Dayton’s Great Teacher,” *The Dayton Journal*, n.d. Moraine Park School Collection.
- ²⁰ Virginia and Bruce Ronald, *School days: An Informal History of Education in Montgomery County, Ohio from 1926 to 1990* (Dayton, OH: Landfall Press, 1991), 25-26; Lutz to Alumnus, 3 June 1927, Dayton Collection Pamphlets.
- ²¹ Ravitch, *Left Back*, 465-467.