Exploring Crucial Outdoor Skills
by Sabrina Carlson

On September 26, 2017, twelve students from Ms. Neta's Outdoor Explorations Class at Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy learned critical map and compass skills to add to their outdoor exploration toolbox.

We began looking at USGS maps of areas around US to learn to identify and interpret crucial details like contour lines, elevation intervals, bodies of water and other features. We played a game of “TOPO!” to make looking for these details more fun and engaging. TOPO is like bingo, but instead of looking for letters and numbers, you look for topographical features. When you have found 5 you can shout “TOPO!” to claim bragging rights.

Next we oriented ourselves to the parts and use of the compass. We learned to locate the cardinal directions by turning the faceplate to the desired heading and putting “red fred in the shed.” We played two different games to practice dead reckoning skills. One in which they follow a series of bearing directions, placing plastic markers on the ground at each step along the way forming a mystery shape like a triangle or hexagon. The other had them following coordinates from an object placed on the ground. If they follow the steps correctly they ended up back at their original spot. They all did a terrific job and seemed to grasp the skills very quickly.

Once we had our map and compass skills cemented separately, we put them together. We practiced taking a bearing off of a physical object in the distance and off of the map and translating between the two. Last but not least students were invited to triangulate their location in their school yard using two points on distant land features.

Everyone learned some new skills that could serve them on a future adventure, and many became quite enthralled with the process of wanting to know more. They even wanted to keep going when class was over. It's fun learning to be confident and self sufficient in the wilderness!
This outing was made possible with support from Arizona Trail Association members, donors and grant funds from:

Arizona Lottery

UniSource Energy Services

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