October Sky Viewing Guide – Teacher’s Guide

Viewing October Sky is a great way to launch your Career Choices course. Once you’ve completed chapter one of Career Choices, you’ll want to show the excellent film October Sky. The questions that follow were designed to highlight the most important topics from chapter one:

- Vision + Energy = Success
- Everybody Works
- Defining Success

You can also introduce future concepts, such as:

- The Message Center (chapter two)
- Avoiding Detours and Roadblocks (chapter nine)

Class Brainstorming

These questions can be assigned individually, but it may be more productive at the beginning of your course to practice group (large or small) brainstorming. A group dialogue can foster further in-depth discussion of important points.

Discussion Questions

1) In chapter one of your Career Choices textbook, you’ve worked through the concept of “Vision + Energy = Success”. This is also an important theme in October Sky. Identify at least two scenes in the early part of the movie that helped Homer solidify his vision of the future.

Possible Answers

The launch of Sputnik and watching it orbit the earth. Homer got caught up in wondering how something like that was possible, which made him curious about the process and the people figuring out how to accomplish things like that.

There’s also a nice contrast visually between Coalwood (which we can equate with Homer’s past) and Sputnik (which we can equate with Homer’s future). Coalwood is all about coal mining, which takes place deep under the earth. Sputnik is orbiting miles above the earth. And, Homer is stuck somewhere between the two, pulled by two distant poles.
“College scholarships for science fair?” – The moment when Homer finds out from Ms. Reilly that he could possibly win a college scholarship through the science fair. Up until then the only way he saw to get to college was through football, which wasn’t much of an option for him.

When Homer’s group of friends is in the middle of an argument and the guy in the flashy car pulls up and asks for directions back to the highway. It gives them a glimpse of what life outside of Coalwood could be like – all bright and shiny and fast.

2) Homer’s vision, simply stated in one line from the movie, is “I’m going to build a rocket.” But, in order to bring that vision to fruition, he and his friends need to exert an awful lot of energy. Identify at least five ways in which Homer and his friends apply the necessary energy.

Possible Answers
- They hike 8 miles to get off company property so they can launch their rockets.
- They construct a launch site, hauling all of the materials they need the 8 miles.
- They have to haul off the leftover cement.
- They pull up the rails and spikes to get money for the metal they need.
- They have to track down a source of moonshine to use as propellant.
- Lots for trial and error. Building and launching rockets over and over again.
- “I’ll learn the math. I’ll learn everything.” Homer’s response to Ms. Reilly when she gives him the book about rocketry.
- The search for the lost rocket.
- Homer does the math to prove their rocket couldn’t have started the fire.
- Homer has to make up his own mind about his future, in the coal mine or building rockets. Stepping outside of the mould and doing something unexpected or untried takes a lot more energy than just doing what others think you should do.
- Re-enrolls in school and enters the science fair.

3) There is an African proverb that says “It takes a village to raise a child.”

Explain what you think that means and how it was demonstrated in the movie October Sky.

Possible Answer
- This proverb is essentially saying that the success of young people is really something that everyone in a community, not just the child’s parents, should be concerned with and supportive of. This is demonstrated in the movie by several different instances.
Ms. Reilly is focused on much more than just getting her students through high school. She wants to help them develop a vision of what is available to them outside of Coalwood. The Russian machinist helps with the welding. Members of the community come out to watch the launches – more and more each time. Leon, another machinist, helps them over and over in creating the cone-like piece for their rockets.

4) What messages are the adults in the community giving the “Rocket Boys” about their project and their futures?

Possible Answer

Ms. Reilly: There is life outside of Coalwood and you can achieve great things if you are willing to work toward a goal.
The principal (at least initially): “Some get lucky and get football scholarships, but most of them will just wind up shoveling coal.”
The forest service guys: Your project is dangerous and you have to stop.
Members of the community who come out to watch the launches: This is something different and exciting and, possibly, worth learning more about.
The two machinists at the mine that help: You boys are brave for what you’re trying to accomplish and I’ll support you, even if it’s in small ways. Students might also think of messages from Homer’s mom, Homer’s dad, and some of the other students at the school.

5) Even with all of the support they get from the community, the boys run into many “roadblocks”. Outline some of the roadblocks they face as a group and at least one roadblock Homer faces personally.

Possible Answers

Group Roadblocks

They get arrested for the fire.
All of the “errors” in their “trial and error” process of building rockets.
Finding ways to fund their rocket building.
The attitudes of many in the town: “Some get lucky and get football scholarships, but most of them will just wind up shoveling coal.”
Ms. Reilly has Hodgkin’s Disease.
Someone steals a part of their exhibit at the science fair and a strike at the mine makes it look like replacing it in time won’t be possible.

Homer’s Roadblocks

His father thinks that his interest in rockets is a waste of time. At one point early on, he throws out all of Homer’s equipment/supplies.
At one point, Homer has a disagreement with his friends and it looks like he might have to continue on by himself.
His dad gets hurt and Homer goes to work in the mine to help support the family, which means he has to drop out of school.

6) Homer and his friends achieve what they set out to do—winning the national science fair and earning scholarships to college. Outline at least two other successes they had along the way.

Possible Answers
- Each time they launched a rocket, more and more of the community came out to watch.
- They were able to use their knowledge of math and science to prove they couldn’t have been responsible for the fire.
- They won the county science fair.
- Homer re-enrolled in high school.
- Homer’s dad showed up to watch the final launch.
- All of the “Rocket Boys” graduated from college.