This collection of essays by Foxfire practitioners represents the wide range of adaptations by educators of the pedagogical orientation of the Foxfire Magazine and Foxfire Programs for Teachers. Former students in the magazine class at Rabun County High School share the continuing impact of that experience on their lives, including a former student who is pioneering the magazine project with her sixth grade class. An early childhood teacher make a passionate, articulate case for instruction guided by the Foxfire Core Practices. And a former school administrator shares his experiences as guidance to current school administrators in enabling then supporting teachers to implement instruction guided by Foxfire's Core Practices.

Participants in Foxfire's Program for Teachers, from early childhood teachers to college professors, describe their adaptations of the Foxfire Approach for instruction at all grade levels, all subjects and all demographics – including how they coped with the challenges they faced. One practitioner describes how she used the Core Practices to design instruction in rural China. We have an engaging essay focused on our summer courses for teachers, based on extensive observations and interview of participants attending those courses.

Several essays explore the pedagogical roots of the Foxfire Approach, as well as its value in providing instruction today which engages the students in the content and results in durable learning. 

Readers can read straight through the book, beginning with a short historical introductory essay, or skip around to topics of interest to assemble an informed assessment of the potential of the Foxfire Approach.
The Foxfire Approach
The Foxfire Approach

Inspiration for Classrooms and Beyond

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SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI
A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6300-563-0 (hardback)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
https://www.sensepublishers.com/

All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

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This collection of essays and reflections are dedicated to all of the students, teachers and community members who have supported Foxfire over its 50 year history. In particular we want to call out to Ann Moore for her long time commitment to the Foxfire Fund, to Jonathan Blackstock for keeping the Foxfire Magazine as a vital part of RCHS’ students lives, and to Hunter Mooreman for his sensitive and progressive leadership as chair of the Foxfire Board. Robert Murray is no longer with us but his love for the land and his knowledge about its ability to empower all who visited with him will always be missed.
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HILTON SMITH

AN INTRODUCTION

Consider the contexts in which many, maybe most teachers try to teach today:
(1) burdensome, detailed, curricula, often in the form of “standards,” sometimes
accompanied by day-to-day prescribed instruction; (2) large classes (imagine a
biology class with 32 students in which you are expected to conduct “experiments”);
(3) disconnect between schools and the communities they serve; (4) school
administrators who seem bent on enforcing whatever the “system” requires; (5)
education hierarchies which seem remote from the realities of schools, students
and teachers; (6) schools which seem designed to perpetuate the socio-economic
disparities of our national culture.

Did you miss anything you expected? Perhaps high-stakes tests, with teacher
performance rated on students’ test scores?

Less obvious, unless you are an educator tracking such things, is the reality of
the short shelf-life of promising innovations. If you stay in the profession longer
than five years, you are almost bound to be a participant in something promising,
often promoted by your school or school district. Then the funding disappears, or
the administration announces that program will be replaced by something they
have decided would work better. Is the current trend of teachers leaving the profession
after or before five years surprising?

At one point Foxfire-sponsored initiatives at the high school included a video
program, developing video versions of magazine articles, taught by Mike Cook, a
former student in the magazine course. Bob Bennett created an outdoor education
program as an alternative to required physical education courses. George Reynolds,
skilled musician and certified in music education, involved students who had never
had an opportunity to try their hand at music, especially the traditional music of
Appalachia. One group of those students bonded into a string band, performing
at schools, civic events, and clubs in the region. They appeared on the nationally
televised program “Grand Ole Opry,” where the announcer forgot whatever they
had selected as a name, stumbling out “The…uh…Foxfire Boys!” That name stuck
and the group has stayed together for the intervening years. They have recorded
their music. And this writer tried adapting Foxfire to required high school social
studies courses, an initiative which provided valuable perspectives when we initiated
Programs for Teacher.

In light of the foregoing portrait of teaching, is it surprising that in 2016 we will
celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Foxfire Magazine, published by students at
Rabun County High School, Georgia. Foxfire students and alums are preparing volume #13 of the Foxfire books to mark this milestone.

This cultural journalism project has survived changes in Rabun County school superintendents, new principals at the high school, and wave after wave of state-mandated curriculum “reforms.” Consider also the political and sociological tensions wracking the U.S. during those years (1966-present), often manifested in attempts to make public schooling a corollary villain for the failure of citizens to behave as expected.

More to the point of this book: In 2016, we will celebrate the 30th anniversary of Foxfire’s programs for teachers. As will be manifested in the essays and commentaries, the durability of those programs reflects our determination to maintain the integrity of what we came to refer to as the “approach,” as well as a conscious disposition to deal with the realities of schooling, reforms, retreatment, and retreat to the familiarities of the past. As we work with classroom teachers as they contemplate how to implement Foxfire’s Core Practices in their classrooms in contexts with mandated curricula and limited resources, we often characterize the process as subverting the dominant paradigm. More about that throughout the book.

THE APPROACH

With the publication of The Foxfire Book in 1968, containing articles composed by students for previous issues of the Foxfire Magazine, the high school project gained national attention. English teachers wanted to know how they could engage their students in that kind of accelerated acquisition of composition skills. Over the next decade Wigginton and his students addressed educator audiences of all kinds, Foxfire books came out at regular intervals, and this modest program attracted the attention of educators and foundations.

The Bingham Foundation of Connecticut paid us a visit in 1986 at our offices at the Foxfire Center, the collection of old buildings of various kinds donated by families in the region interested in the preservation of those artifacts of a disappearing culture.

Apparently many foundations reassessed their sponsorship of education programs during the 1980’s. The visit by the Bingham Foundation ostensibly was to probe our thoughts about best programs to consider for additional funding. The real purpose: An assessment of Foxfire’s potential to become a change agent in unshackling schooling from the entrenched, unpromising practices typical of most public schools.

The next week the Bingham Foundation offered Foxfire a challenging grant: To actively explore the potential that the pedagogical practices which guided Foxfire’s cultural journalism program at Rabun County High School could be adapted – key word there: adapted – for students in grades K-12, all different subject fields, and all demographics. It was a one-time grant: $5M; five years.
All of us involved in Foxfire were high school teachers – magazine, music, video, outdoor education, social studies – so we engaged this challenge with perspectives informed by those experiences. Three durable guidelines emerged from our deliberations:

1. Participation by teachers would have to be by their informed choices, not by direction from someone in the central office to participate in a “staff development” session.

2. There would have to be continuing support, preferably involving the other participants in ongoing dialogue, for teachers to figure out how to adapt the Core Practices to their own unique situations. We noted how so many professional development programs resembled summertime religious revivals: the righteous enthusiasm disappearing with the temptations of fall and football and automobiles.

3. Aware of the loss of integrity and momentum of promising education movements as they expanded in concentric circles – each subsequent circle a diluted version of the original – we agreed that somehow we had to maintain the integrity of whatever we initiated. At the same time, we knew we had to respect the perspectives of fellow educators from different grade levels, subject fields, and demographics – just as we expected to be respected as classroom teachers. Note: Turns out that the tensions involved in those two perspectives provide a continuous dynamic which stimulates flexibility and deliberation. Almost 30 years later, our dialogue and decisions reflect continued attention to both perspectives.

How to label our venture into programs for teachers? What we advocated was not a “method,” nor a “strategy,” nor an “activity,” nor a “curriculum,” nor a distinctive “pedagogy.” In year two of our implementation of the Bingham grant, in a conversation involving a teacher from the Foxfire teachers’ network in up-state New York, the coordinator of the Foxfire teachers’ network in North Carolina, and this writer, one of us said something like, “Well, it’s how you approach situations as a teacher…” That was it: The mind-set each of us holds as we approach planning, implementation, and reflection on our instructional practices. Through our programs for teachers we aim to influence each teacher’s instructional practices by considering Foxfire’s Core Practices as key elements in his/her mind-set.

THE CORE PRACTICES

Foxfire developed the first version of the Core Practices for use in a cultural journalism project sponsored by the Institutional Development and Economic Affairs Service (IDEAS) around 1980–87. The six practices in that version established the central practices of Foxfire: Student involvement in all aspects of the work; clear focus on academic learning results; production for an audience; and active learning.

In 1986–87, we revised the Core Practices to (1) reflect the need to embrace practices that complemented those in the original version, and (2) serve as guidelines
for the practitioners who would be participating in the K-12 Foxfire teacher networks forming as a result of our Teacher Outreach initiative.

The third version, developed around 1997–98, reflected the contributions of practitioners though the first ten years of the Teacher Outreach program. This version included the expansion of some of the Core Practices, as well as some needed refinements in the wording of the Practices.

Participants in the Foxfire-Piedmont Partnership’s Programs for Teachers from 2004 to 2008, including college instructors, agreed that it was time for another revision of the Core Practices. Long time practitioners agreed, affirming that the Core Practices should be a dynamic document which reflects our awareness of developments we should embrace, while avoiding the latest fads promoted as the new magic wands to improve schooling in the U.S. The 2009 version reflected those perspectives, plus ordering the Practices in a sequence intended to guide new practitioners into effective implementation over time.

The current version came from a systematic review in Fall 2013. It reflects some refinements in language, plus a slight adjustment in the sequence. We added a “Note” providing the criteria an instructional practice had to meet to be included.

The Core Practices define what we came to refer to as “the Foxfire approach.” They serve as guidelines and criteria for classroom practitioners, not as a “method” which can be presented in a staff development session on Monday and applied on Tuesday. Like the ongoing effort in this nation to fulfill the principles of democracy, Foxfire-inspired teachers strive to fulfill all ten Core Practices. In practice, those moments rarely occur – and they are transitory when they do – but they are affirming, shining moments, shared by students, teachers, and their communities.

In our courses and workshops for teachers, we encourage active, critical engagement with the Core Practices, as opposed to passive acceptance. We take time to consider the “yeah-buts” that result from projecting each Core Practice into the realities of each participant’s classroom, including the challenges entailed in mandated standards, high stakes tests, and lock-step curricula. Thus each practitioner takes charge of the application of the Core Practices in her/his classroom – and then becomes a contributor to the next version of the Core Practices.

The Core Practices appear as Exhibit A. We encourage readers to engage them – preferably with two or three colleagues – to imagine classrooms where the approach to planning, implementing and reflecting on instruction includes The Core Practices in practitioners’ mindsets.

Four essays in this volume flesh out the development of Foxfire and provide perspectives into the contexts in which Foxfire became a respected journal about Appalachia, then expanded into a model for instructional practices.

• Barry Siles’ short essay puts the creation and development of “the Land,” as we refer to the Foxfire Center, into historical perspective, and includes brief mentions about current developments.
• The title of George Reynolds essay, “Sound Reasoning: How the Foxfire Boys emerged and became a community institution,” clearly describes the focus of his essay about the evolution of the Foxfire music program under his guidance and provides inspiration for Foxfire-inspired initiatives in the arts.

• “No Inert Learning Accepted at Foxfire!” provides what we describe as a “brief overview of the development of Foxfire…and an update on what Foxfire is doing… more than 40 years later.”

• “Eliot Wigginton’s Relational Pragmatism,” Frank Margonis’ stimulating analysis of the pedagogical insights which enabled Wigginton’s ventures to succeed beyond what he and his students envisioned, take us inside the yin-and-yang of decision-making in such an enterprise.

• Janet Rechtman’s substantive piece, “From Active Learning to Activist Learning…,” provides both a political and a pedagogical perspective for Foxfire’s development. Her closing reflection – “the path from active learning to activist learning has spiraled into more questions than answers” – leads to the admonition to “be prepared for the long haul, since we’ve been talking about this for nearly 50 years.”

Essays representing three (actually four) generations of Foxfire Magazine students aptly convey how the Foxfire Magazine has continued publication for 50 years – through several school district superintendents, several high school principals, many changes on the local school board, as well as economic and political developments which urbanized the area – inspiring students and expanding the reach of the magazine into other states.

• Lacy Hunter Nix’s essay, “Looking Home to Find My Way Forward…,” will resonate with anyone with teen-aged children as well as teachers for grades 8–12.

• Katie Lunsford’s essay, “Foxfire and the Community…,” contains insights which demonstrate the durable learning resulting from being part of the magazine project, learnings which continue as insights into the socio-economic trends today.

• Joy Phillips’ project with her 5th and 6th graders to publish their on-line version of the Foxfire Magazine, “Foxfire is More…,” inspires us all with Foxfire’s prospects in “the digital age.” Read her piece to find the “fourth generation.”

Kiel Harrell – surely inspired by his wife’s experience taking the Foxfire course for teachers then using the Foxfire approach teaching a fifth-grade class in rural central China, “From Rabun County to Yonji County…” dipped into his dissertation research to provide the most complete and affirming narrative of the Foxfire course for teachers, “The Foxfire Course for Teachers…”.

Though Foxfire began as a high school venture, we have found that teachers in grades 1–6 actually seem to get the vision and design instruction guided by the Core Practices quicker than teachers for grades 9–12. Sara Alice Tucker, early childhood educator, describes her early encounter with Foxfire – a professional development experience with a Foxfire-inspired educator – then her applications of the Foxfire
approach in elementary classrooms, both public and private. On the way, Dr. Tucker lines up the burdensome requirements forced on teachers for a scathing review that politicians need to read and heed.

Teachers contemplating instruction guided by Foxfire’s Core Practices nearly always express concern whether their “administration,” usually referring to the school principal, will support their efforts. Edd Diden, a school administrator who actually steered his teachers toward Foxfire, as well as developing a support system for them, provides guidance to administrators in “Administrative Support for the Foxfire Approach…”

Early in the development of our Programs for Teachers we noticed that the Foxfire approach might show up in almost any education endeavor. Jan Buley, one of our Foxfire course facilitators, describes her adventures using the approach in higher ed. “Foxfire Goes to University…”.

Three essays locate Foxfire in larger contexts: “Nurturing Civic Involvement…” by Greg Smith and “Project Based learning, a Center for Design Class and Foxfire” by Keith Phillips describe how Foxfire facilitates Place-Based Education. Clifford Knapp takes us on his education journey into many institutions and programs, “Experiential Education…”, so we can see multiple possibilities for the Foxfire approach.

Most every educator considering all the preceding success stories might say, “Yeah, but will it work for me where I teach?” Steve Williams, Foxfire practitioner, and his wife Wilma Hutcheson-Williams, chair of the Education Committee of the Foxfire Board and a facilitator of our course for teachers, provide us with a scholarly response: “Research: How Do We Know Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning Works?” Cynthia’s answer to the question, “will it work for me?” comes from her long association with Foxfire in many facets: “Foxfire as a Need-Satisfying, Non-coercive Process”. The title is a good clue to the answer.

George Wood’s association with Foxfire goes back almost 50 years, when he served on our first national advisory board. Currently serving as director of Coalition of Essential Schools, George wraps up this book addressing this: In case you didn’t get the message from the preceding pages about why you should consider the Foxfire approach in whatever you are doing, here it is again!

Assembling these essays affirmed our shared sense that for many more decades Foxfire and our Programs for Teachers have potential to inspire teachers at all grade levels, all subjects and all demographics to engage their students in bringing content to life. In the process, students and their teachers acquire durable learning—the kind of learning that equips them with the knowledge and dispositions to be effective citizens in a democracy. Is there any doubt that those traits are in short supply these days, a dispiriting by-product of schooling-as usual, standardized curricula, restrictive policies, and uninspiring instruction? At the same time these essays remind us of the challenges we face to fulfill Foxfire’s vision. Educators inspired to join us in this venture may initiate contact at www.foxfirepartnerships.org, or hsmith@piedmont.edu.
THE CORE PRACTICES

The Core Practices were tested and refined by hundreds of teachers working mostly in isolated and diverse classrooms around the country. When implemented, the Core Practices define an active, learner-centered, community-focused approach to teaching and learning.

Regardless of a teacher’s experience, the school context, subject matter, or population served, the Approach can be adapted in meaningful and substantial ways, creating learning environments that are the same but different – environments that grow out of a clearly articulated set of beliefs and, at the same time, are designed to fit the contour of the landscape in which they are grown.

Considered separately, the Core Practices include eleven tenets of effective teaching and learning. Verified as successful through years of independent study, teachers begin their work through any number of entry points or activities. The choices they make about where to begin and where to go next are influenced by individual school and community contexts, teacher’s interests and skills, and learners’ developmental levels.

As teachers and learners become more skilled and confident, the Core Practices provide a decision-making framework which allows teachers to tightly weave fragmented pieces of classroom life into an integrated whole. When they are applied as a way of thinking rather than a way of doing, the complexities of teaching decisions become manageable, and one activity or new understanding leads naturally to many others.

If teachers choose the Approach to guide their teaching decisions, it is not important where they start, only that they start. The adaptability and room for growth in skill and understanding make the Core Practices a highly effective, life-long tool for self-reflection, assessment, and ongoing professional development.

The Work Teachers and Learners Do Together Is Infused from the Beginning with Learner Choice, Design, and Revision

The central focus of the work grows out of learners’ interests and concerns. Most problems that arise during classroom activity are solved in collaboration with learners, and learners are supported in the development of their ability to solve problems and accept responsibility.

The Academic Integrity of the Work Teachers and Learners Do Together Is Clear

Mandated skills and learning expectations are identified to the class. Through collaborative planning and implementation, students engage and accomplish the
mandates. In addition, activities assist learners in discovering the value and potential of the curricula and its connections to other disciplines.

The Role of the Teacher Is That of Facilitator and Collaborator

Teachers are responsible for assessing and attending to learners’ developmental needs, providing guidance, identifying academic givens, monitoring each learner’s academic and social growth, and leading each into new areas of understanding and competence.

The Work Is Characterized by Active Learning

Learners are thoughtfully engaged in the learning process, posing and solving problems, making meaning, producing products, and building understandings. Because learners engaged in these kinds of activities are risk takers operating on the edge of their competence, the classroom environment provides an atmosphere of trust where the consequence of a mistake is the opportunity for further learning.

Peer Teaching, Small Group Work, and Teamwork Are All Consistent Features of Classroom Activities

Every learner is not only included, but needed, and, in the end, each can identify her or his specific stamp upon the effort.

There Is an Audience beyond the Teacher for Learner Work

It may be another individual, or a small group, or the community, but it is an audience the learners want to serve or engage. The audience, in turn, affirms the work is important, needed, and worth doing.

New Activities Spiral Gracefully out of the Old, Incorporating Lessons Learned from Past Experiences, Building on Skills and Understandings That Can Now Be Amplified

Rather than completion of a study being regarded as the conclusion of a series of activities, it is regarded as the starting point for a new series.

Reflection Is an Essential Activity That Takes Place at Key Points Throughout the Work

Teachers and learners engage in conscious and thoughtful consideration of the work and the process. It is this reflective activity that evokes insight and gives rise to revisions and refinements.
Connections between the Classroom Work, the Surrounding Communities, and the World beyond the Community Are Clear

Course content is connected to the community in which the learners live. Learners’ work will “bring home” larger issues by identifying attitudes about and illustrations and implications of those issues in their home communities.

Imagination and Creativity Are Encouraged in the Completion of Learning Activities

It is the learner’s freedom to express and explore, to observe and investigate, and to discover that are the basis for aesthetic experiences. These experiences provide a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction and lead to deeper understanding and an internal thirst for knowledge.

The Work Teachers and Learners Do Together Includes Rigorous, Ongoing Assessment and Evaluation

Teachers and learners employ a variety of strategies to demonstrate their mastery of teaching and learning objectives.
1. NO INERT LEARNING ACCEPTED AT FOXFIRE!

INTRODUCTION

Among the many brilliant educators who have brought alternatives to the classroom, perhaps none has created such an interesting marriage between all aspects of the Outdoor Education traditions and the traditional classroom than Foxfire and the imagination and experimentation of Brooks Eliot Wigginton (Wig). This chapter introduces a brief overview of the development of Foxfire, some insight into Wig and his personal philosophy and an update on what Foxfire as an organization is doing today, more than 40 years later.

Alfred North Whitehead, philosopher, mathematician and educator, in his Presidential address to the Mathematical Association of England in 1916 challenged the status quo educational model. Strong words as he stated, Culture is activity of thought and receptiveness to beauty and humane feelings. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well informed man is the most useless bore on God’s earth. What we should aim at producing is men who possess both culture and expert knowledge…. In training a child to activity of thought, above all things we must be aware of what I will call “inert ideas” – that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations. …Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is, above all things, harmful;—Corruptio optimi, pessima. From the very beginning of his education, the child should experience the joy of discovery. The discovery which he has to make is that generally ideas give an understanding of that stream of events which pours through his life, which is his life. …The only use of knowledge of the past is to equip us for the present. Theoretical ideas should always find important applications within the pupil’s curriculum. This is not an easy doctrine to apply. It contains within itself the problem of keeping knowledge alive, of preventing it from becoming inert, which is the central problem of all education (pp. 1–3; italics added).

Some educators struggle to create educational experiences that are relevant and, happily, the central aim for Experiential education is exactly that. Gardner found “that scholastic knowledge (inert) seems strictly bound to school settings while outdoor education fosters “connected knowing,” where education is part of, rather than separate from life (p. 122). Unlike classroom learning, outdoor education uses the students’ whole environment as a source of knowledge. The community, rather
than the classroom, is the context for learning where real experiences can occur. Experiential learning theory defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience (Kolb, 41).

What is significant about Foxfire is the transformation that it allows. Wigg describes the pecking order that exists for many students in school. “Certain students get to do everything and other students get to do very little. And one of the magical aspects of this whole endeavor is that virtually anybody can play a part and make a contribution and it doesn’t have anything to do with strength or looks or popularity or money of whether or not you have a car or any of those other trappings of adolescent prestige. Those fall by the wayside in a situation like this” (Wigginton, 1988, p. 32).

Boss describes three outdoor education approaches. The first, adventure education, usually takes place outdoors and aims to develop interpersonal competencies and enhance leadership and decision making skills. Outdoor education nurtures a respect for our connectedness with nature and the wider community and this connectedness flows over into an awareness of our relatedness to others in the community. Kurt Hahn, in an address in 1965, eloquently described his hope for Outward Bound and what it could accomplish for society at large.

The tragic history of continental countries transmits the warning that we should take heed of Napoleon’s words: “The world is not ruined by the wickedness of the wicked, but by the weakness of the good.” Again and again when disastrous decisions were taken by German governments in the last 50 years, wise men retreated in noble helplessness, lamenting events which they could have influenced. If we take to heart the lessons of history, we will regard it as a very serious responsibility of schools to build up the nervous strength in the vulnerable, the imaginative, the sensitive by methods which will harden yet spare them so that they will be better able to stand the strain which responsible citizenship imposes. (Hahn, p. 4, 1965)

The second, cultural journalism, helps students understand their community and their place in it. Gathering community resources through interviews and research is an historic process that takes many forms such as courses, magazines, newspapers, anthologies and various nonprint forms. It may be community based or may portray a culture for a general audience. Even though the process is not new, the term—cultural journalism—was first used to describe publications inspired by Foxfire (Olmstead, 1989). Olmstead states that as the world grows smaller, the mutual understanding of diverse groups of people becomes more important to peace and cooperation. Cultural journalism is a vehicle to promote such understanding (p. 2). This was an essential concern for Wig’s regarding his students because he found a deep level of prejudice and mis-information not only about those outside their community but also about their own community. Cultural understanding is a powerful way to help students understand their role in our democracy.
We see decent people commit unthinkable acts. We see decent people silent in the face of unthinkable acts. …The survival task of humanity is clear; it is to envision and create institutions, from our schools to our media to our businesses that foster our democratic selves—people able to feel and express empathy and to see through the walls of race, culture and religion that divide us, people who know how to exert power while maintaining relationships. We’ve blinded ourselves to the most powerful tool we have. That tool is democracy. (Lappe, 2006)

The third model, participatory research, is best exemplified by Myles Horton and the work of the Highlander Center. Participatory research is done by members of a community who want to solve (and resolve) a problem that affects them personally. Similar in philosophy to the work of Paulo Freire, engaging the community in ways that support their own skills and capacities provides lasting change. Horton describes the efforts of three liberatory programs and says that they “were based on the democratic principle of faith in the people: i.e. trust in the people’s ability to govern themselves and make decisions about their lives. The underlying purpose was the same: to empower people. That is the common denominator (p. 185).

What is clear from the 40+ years of work of the Foxfire Fund, is that all three elements of Outdoor Education are present. The place where the learning takes place is both the community and the classroom. Cultural Journalism is a key component, as the students interact with the community not only to preserve elements of the culture but to understand their place in that culture. The third piece, participatory research, yields numerous opportunities for the students to work with the community (both within the classroom and outside of its four walls) to find solutions to challenges. But a question to be addressed here is how did Foxfire become so clearly linked to the principles of outdoor education when the founder, Brooks Eliot Wigginton (known to his colleagues and students as Wig), was not an outdoor educator?

The most complete record of the history of the development of Foxfire is found in Wigginton’s personal narrative, Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience (Twenty Years Teaching in a High School Classroom). Published in 1985, and six years in the writing, it chronicles Wig’s thinking beginning in 1963 during his college years at Cornell. Wig shows us how his dissatisfaction with inert education generated his willingness to try something different.

A brief history; Wig graduated from college ready to begin his career as a high school English teacher. Without much planning and after a few letters to find a job, he ended up in Rabun Gap, Georgia, an area he knew since he had grown up in Athens (some 80 miles away) where his father had been a professor of Landscape Architecture. He began his professional career in Rabun Gap in August 1966.

It turned out to be an odd job, teaching at the Rabun Gap Nacoochee School (RGNS) which was a semi-private high school (some students came from the local community and others were boarding students). In addition to his teaching assignment (all ninth and tenth grade English, one section of geography) he was
also an assistant house parent. Wig was busy! Unfortunately, things did not go very well for Wig and his classes. He writes, “On one of the bleakest fall days in 1966, I walked into my first-period class, sat down on top of my desk and crossed my legs and said, very slowly and very quietly, “Look this isn’t working. You know it isn’t and I know it isn’t. Now what are we going to do together to make if through the rest of the year?” The class was silent” (p. 32).

With fits and starts, and many ideas that were initially accepted and others that were rejected, students made suggestions and Wig worked with them all. He continues, “for several weeks we experimented. Seasoned teachers, had any been watching us, would say we floundered, but I prefer the sound of experimented” (p. 46).

Many hours and discussions later, and with Wig relating his personal experience with magazine writing, the classes decided to move forward with a magazine and determined that it would contain work by Rabun Gap students and work from students from other schools, work by professional writers and authors and articles from the surrounding community. This last insightful decision in fact made all the difference.

But what was it that allowed Wig to take this kind of educational risk. What did he have in mind that would allow students the kind of freedom necessary to make decisions? What supported his thinking to allow the practices of democratic teaching practices to prevail? Loathe to keep much of his personal journals entries from college, this tidbit gives us something of a sense of the kind of personal philosophy that was at work.

I sincerely feel that this cautiousness stifles all individuality even more than the machinery of society. People are no longer willing to live dangerously, try things that may hurt them or possibly knock them flat, We think too damn much and don’t rely on impulse anymore. In a way that’s too bad. I think. Millions of little aspects enter every decision and we see all the aspects and it scares us off from making any decision at all except to forget the whole thing. April 1963. (Wigginton, p. 47, 1985)

Born on that impulsive day in 1966 was the start of what has come to be known as the Foxfire Approach. No formula, no teachers manuals, no curriculum guide, no in-service from the visiting expert. Just one teacher believing that children could make decisions and take responsibility for carrying them out and figuring out the skills they needed in the process was all it took!

Of course it was not easy. There was no money for the production, no equipment except an old WWII camera that had been handed down to Wig. But the interest and excitement and commitment from the students (and of course the support from Wig and the principal) made it happen.

But what is Foxfire? One person who worked closely with Wig is Hilton Smith. For the remainder of the article we will proceed with an interview format to be
consistent with the method the Foxfire magazine students would be using if they were writing this article.

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT WIG THAT ALLOWED HIM TO HAVE SUCH TRUST IN THE STUDENTS?

Initially, he had no more trust in students than any other teacher at that school. But once he noticed how well students handled the responsibilities entailed in creating issues of the magazine – and how quickly their language arts skills advanced – he connected the dots and realized that they craved that trust and that he had to extend the trust for the venture to continue past a one-year project.

Also, his trust is not a matter of either/or sentiment. To some teachers the prospect of that much trust comes across as giving up “control.” Wig is not naïve about adolescents, so his classroom management involves anticipation of the students’ responses to challenges and opportunities. Control becomes a collaborative responsibility, with the teacher being vigilant about the possibilities of things going off the rails.

The magazine was a huge risk, even though he had the support of the principal. Why do you think he was able to take that risk?

His passion about the potential value of language arts skills served as a kind of keel for his teaching. Wig did not see the magazine as a “risk,” but did see the risk to his students if they did not acquire those skills. Also keep in mind that since RGNS was a private school, with a student population consisting mostly of underachievers at that time, there was less chance of parents questioning the efficacy of the magazine as a worthy endeavor. Finally, as he acknowledged frequently, when the local community responded so positively to the published interviews of local people, the project had all the support it needed to deal with any nay-sayers.

Outdoor Education and other experiential experiences are designed to help students grow and mature in ways that “inert” education can’t. What benefit did the Foxfire approach have on students?

Students acquired an enhanced sense of themselves as learners, along with some durable skills in and appreciation of literature and composition. That tends to translate into what we’d call metacognition now, in the sense that they approached other learning situations more aware of how to cope with them.

Along with those gains, his students began to realize that the culture of the southern Appalachians had many aspects to be proud of. They moved away from that sense of being hillbillies and therefore something inferior, toward more positive attitudes about themselves as part of that culture. The fact that about half the members of his classes were residential students from other part of the nation added to that development as they, too, looked on that culture with more appreciation. This
enabled Wig to work to dissolve the endemic racial and ethnic prejudices of the local students, an aspect of the Approach that continued when the program moved to the public comprehensive high school.

Finally, Foxfire students learned that much of what is worthy to be learned is in venues other than the school building. That, too, became part of the Approach and was applied in other situations, including Native American communities and inner-city neighborhoods.

As a community-based process, did Rabun County change as a result of Foxfire?
With the publication of the Foxfire books, there was a discernable increase in cultural pride in the region. Foxfire became a kind of reference point for the people in the region. The instructional program at Rabun County High School changed, eventually including five Foxfire-influenced teachers (magazine, video, music, outdoor education, and social studies). We have to suspect that had a residual impact on the local area, but documenting that would be very difficult.

Wig had to be encouraged to teach others about the process, partially because he knew that the magazine was not Foxfire. Was he satisfied with the national expansion and did it maintain its integrity as an approach?
During the years following the publication of The Foxfire Book, teachers from all over sought him out to learn how to initiate similar “projects” with their classes. When I joined Foxfire in 1984, we kept track of about two dozen of what had become know as “cultural journalism” magazine projects around the U.S. That very few of them survived more than few years – and that none of them caught on with other teachers in their schools – informed our later work with teachers.

Wig avers that he first grasped the possibility that Foxfire was more than a magazine as he wrote Moments to respond to an invitation to do some work with IDEAS. As he put it recently, “What were the kinds of practices that stuck with me, that made a difference?” He considered those practices as “common denominators,” and they gained definition as he led workshops of teacher. Those common denominators served as the forerunners of the Core Practices.

By his own acknowledgement, Wig did not have a deep background in education, so many of the experiences and encounters during these years served to fill in his knowledge about schooling. John Dewey’s work, for example, “was not part of the picture” until Foxfire accepted the challenge of systematic dissemination of the approach on a larger scale. During that time various advisers, such as Junius Eddy, suggested things for Wig to read so he would be more conversant in the discourses he would now enter. That’s how Dewey’s Experience and Education came into his view.

But the pivotal period for Wig and the whole Foxfire organization was from 1984 to 1987, when Foxfire received $1½ K from the Bingham Foundation to mount a major Teacher Outreach program. What had been an almost casual sideline for Foxfire had to be tooled up for a systematic initiative to bring the approach to teachers in all
demographic settings, all grade levels, all subjects, and all types of students. And we had to do it so that the results were more durable and would develop a momentum of their own rather than fading away as most initiatives tend to do.

Wig remembers that he approached the pilot course, summer 1986, at Berea College in eastern Kentucky, “with trepidation.” He included Experience and Education as a required reading to provide philosophic grounding for the Approach – as he had experienced it. The course was not going well and there was “whining about the Dewey book.” One member of the class, an archetype of the Appalachian American Gothic woman, sat stoic through the first week of the class, unresponsive even to the other women in the class and seemingly indifferent to Wig. In the middle of the second week, she suddenly addressed the whining majority of the class: “You haven’t heard a thing he has said.” She followed that with a 30-minute oral dissertation relating Dewey and Wig’s commentaries to the miseries of schooling in eastern Kentucky. It was a “shining moment” and the turning point in that class and in Wig’s sense that we could really do this. That teacher returned to the Berea course in 1987 with some of her students to share what they were doing and learning. That set that course on track and established the link between Core Practices, Experience and Education, and teachers’ own practices. That linkage continues essentially unmodified today.

Anecdotes like that characterize the experiences of all of us working with teachers on the Foxfire approach. Because the approach is defined by Core Practices, not principals, and it is an approach, not a technique nor a method, Foxfire becomes the accumulated experiences and reflections of all its practitioners. That gives it both durability and integrity. Wig recognized that and accepted that Foxfire had spiraled into something beyond the parameters of the Foxfire magazine and cultural journalism. It is significant that he continued to focus on his work at the high school, while accepting invitations to present at various events that aided the overall effort.

The most difficult aspect of the history of Wig involves his conviction to a charge of molesting a minor. How did Wig’s conviction affect the organization? Having the founder plead guilty to a charge of molesting a minor would have killed many education programs. Foxfire survived for several reasons. In the minds of most people in northeast Georgia, Foxfire’s contributions to students and to the appreciation of the regional culture weighed more than his transgressions. This was manifested by the willingness of store owners to put “Foxfire Still Glows” signs in their front windows. Of course, there was dismay and some anger. But support for the organization remained strong.

Wigginton had little involvement with the Foxfire teacher regional networks that we had developed as the primary Teacher Outreach vehicle. Most of those teachers had never met Wig, so he was more of a mythic figure to them. At the time of the transgression and guilty plea, Foxfire was very fortunate to have as CEO Billy Parrish, who came to us from the Trust for Historic Preservation to manage the organization while Wig moved his work to the University of Georgia. Billy handled
all aspects of the situation with calm determination to not let it sink Foxfire. To that end, he and I made a point of traveling to the teacher networks and giving them the story straight up, no dissembling. So we sustained trust. In fact, in many ways the Foxfire organization was strengthened by the whole ordeal. Much of the credit goes to Billy Parrish.

What has happened to Wig?

After Wig’s arrest he wrote an article from prison (Wigginton, 1993–1994) in which his years of teaching in fact took a deeper turn. Wig compares in rather tragic ways the parallels between public schools and the prison system as he describes a project that the inmates attempted which was to build a library. After 26 years of teaching, Wig makes frightening comparisons between education and prison. He quotes Viktor Frankl, Nazi death camp survivor and world-reknown psychiatrist who wrote that what “exists in nearly all humans; is the desire to make a difference, to be involved in work that matters, to feel a sense of belonging and efficacy. Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life. [What he needs is] the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task (p. 68, 1984).”

The task of a non-inert learning community has at its center such a goal. Involvement, inclusion, shared decision making and utilizing the strengths of each individual are at the core of such work. Wig continues, “ in the absence of an environment that inspires and engages, inmates and students soon ask, “Is this all there is?” For inmates it comes after the shock of incarceration is replaced by a numb throbbing in the soul. Having suffered as much self-loathing as he or she can stand, an inmate finally asks, “Now what do I do? Spend the next five years staring at a wall?” For students it comes with the realization that most courses are driven by the same flat gray routines. The students says, “I’m supposed to spend how many years doing this? You ARE kidding, right?” (Wigginton, 1993, p. 70).

As Wig makes the parallel uncomfortably clear, the reader can find some optimism in the continuing work of Foxfire, best exemplified by the Foxfire Core Practices. At their root is the understanding that work must be meaningful and engaging. In order for students to feel committed to the learning, the teacher and students must collaborate in the creation of the work. To that end, Foxfire and Wigginton continue to inspire us to create the kind of practice so necessary for transformation that although rare is in fact at work in classroom and schools throughout the country. For more information about Foxfire, contact the Foxfire Fund.

NOTE

REFERENCES


2. THE FOXFIRE MUSEUM AND HERITAGE CENTER

The Foxfire Museum and Heritage Center was created much in the same way as Foxfire itself – through the power of student choice and community support. The people the students were interviewing in the early years of the magazine believed so much in what the students were doing, which was preserving their culture, that they gave many of their personal belongings to the students so that the items could be preserved for future generations. The students had no real place to store or display these items, and it gave them the idea and the dream to create a museum.

This kind of dream requires money to fund it and the money came when students were given the opportunity to write The Foxfire Book. When the book contract was signed the intent was to use the monies generated by royalties from book sales to create the museum. In 1974 an old apple orchard on the side of Blackrock Mountain was purchased. A Gristmill, that the students had learned about when interviewing Aunt Arie, was acquired, disassembled and brought up the land and reassembled by the students. A museum was born and a dream became a reality. More buildings were brought up to the land and eventually a village was created. We now have thirty buildings that comprise The Foxfire Museum and Heritage Center. Over the years more and more items have been donated to the museum creating a substantial repository of the Appalachian culture.

What was started decades ago is still growing. Visitation has increased and infrastructure improvements have been made with even more planned. It is Foxfire’s intention to have The Foxfire Museum and Heritage Center become a premier destination of the Southeast and have it be the preeminent site for the interpretation and education about the Appalachian Culture. Kindergarteners to college age students visit the museum regularly to learn more about this amazing culture. Special interpretive programs for 4th grade students have been created to fit within their curriculum. Annual Folk events are held at the Museum that promote the understanding of the Appalachian culture. Visitors from around the world come to the Museum to visit the “home” of Foxfire. Increased interpretation and greater accessibility to the Museum are high priorities in the coming years.

Along with the Museum, the students also created a substantial archive on the Appalachian culture. When students conducted the very first interview, which was with former Sheriff Luther Rickman, they found that they couldn’t remember all of the details very well and that they couldn’t write a very good article from their notes and recollections. They decided to interview Luther Rickman a second time.
and this time bring a reel to reel tape recorder and record the entire interview. How fortunate we are that students learned this on the very first interview. It became standard practice, and still is, to record all interviews. This has created an incredible oral history collection on the Southern Appalachian culture. Thousands of hours of interviews have been collected mostly on magnetic tape. We recently transferred these interviews to a digital format for preservation. Students have also amassed over 100,000 pictures taken over the past 50 years. They have published 194 issues of *The Foxfire Magazine* as well as 12 in the series of *Foxfire Books* and numerous companion books. Plans are being discussed for further preservation work within the archives as well as making the material easier to access by researchers.

What an incredible story: Foxfire is 50 years old and not only still going but still growing!