

SARA G. LAM

10. FROM RABUN COUNTY TO YONJI COUNTY

The Foxfire Approach and Community-Based Education in Rural China

A large white tarp has been raised between two utility poles over the main dirt road that runs through Houjia Zhuang, a village of about five hundred people in central China. At dusk, villagers gather and sit on wooden benches behind the projector. Student speakers from the village elementary school's fifth grade class welcome the villagers and explain the research they have been conducting. They had investigated and collected oral histories about local water – where it comes from, how it is used, and changes over time – and had visited local rivers to observe and record the mechanisms through which water is diverted for industrial usage as well as sources of pollution that are affecting the rivers. They go on to share their findings, using a bamboo pole to point out the diagrams and slides they had created. Some villagers in the audience contributed information or personal stories reflected in the presentation, but still, they leave with new insights. Some learn for the first time how exactly water is brought to the taps in their courtyards, others learn about the different perspectives and water use of people from different generations or from other villages at different points along the local rivers, while still others gain a greater awareness of threats to local water sources and the importance of conservation.

These students have participated in similar projects before as part of an initiative by the Rural China Education Foundation (RCEF) in collaboration with rural teachers to promote learning that is community-based and centered on student inquiry. Our community-based curricular projects consist of community research projects in which students investigate an aspect of the local village community, and service-learning projects in which students investigate an issue of concern to them and take action to address the issue. As a member of RCEF, I led the first community-based education projects with students in the form of an after school club at a rural boarding school,¹ while giving other teachers at the school the opportunity to observe or participate. Later, I joined with teachers of the school to form co-teaching teams in which we collaborated fully in planning and teaching community-based curricular projects. Through this process, a number of partner teachers became committed to this approach to teaching and began to integrate it independently into their own practice. We formed a community of practice that learned through collaborative teaching and through the sharing of independent work. Since then, the teachers

S. G. LAM

have led community-based education projects in other area schools and shared their experiences with other rural teachers through professional development workshops and videos of the community-based education process.²

We learned about Foxfire early on in our practice of community-based education and discovered that we shared many of the goals and principles of the Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning. A colleague and I had the opportunity to participate in the Foxfire Course for Teachers in the summer of 2008. We were inspired by the case studies shared by teachers who used the Foxfire approach and the core practices provided important guidance to us as we continued to improve our practice.

BRIDGING APPALACHIA AND RURAL CHINA

On the surface, the idea that an educational approach rooted in the specific context of Appalachia in the 1960s would be relevant half a century later to educators on the other side of the globe in China may seem strange. In fact, there are educators around the world, working in vastly different contexts, who share a commitment to democratic education in which students have a significant voice in making decisions about the goals and process of their learning. There are educators both in the U.S. and in China who share common ideals of democratic education, who are responding to similar social problems, and who face similar constraints in the form of testing-centered educational policy.

TRADITIONS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

The development of democratic education is often attributed to Western education theorists, such as John Dewey, whose work has informed the Foxfire Approach, when in fact, Chinese educators have made important contributions and innovations in democratic education in their own right. Tao Xingzhi is one such educator. Tao is among the most prominent figures in the field of education in China. As a graduate student, he studied under the leading progressive education scholars at Columbia University in the 1910's and became a leader of the progressive Rural Reconstruction Movement in China upon his return. He advocated for mass education that would empower the peasantry to become a conscious force for rural transformation. Many of Dewey's ideas about education are reflected in Tao's work (Kuhn, 1959; Keenan, 1977; Daykin, 2014): the idea of social transformation as a goal of education and the idea that schools should create opportunities for students to learn through engaging in meaningful work that mirrors work and knowledge in society. Tao often builds on Dewey's ideas and takes them further. In addition to preparing students to participate in a democratic society, he also saw students as agents of change who could help bring about such a society. He not only integrated meaningful work and knowledge from society into schools, but saw society as part of the school (Su, 1996). These differences are reflected in the educational practice of Tao, who brought students out

into the community to help facilitate the resolution of conflict between villagers and to serve as “little teachers” who spread literacy among rural adults.

Tao’s theory and practice provided a framework for our community-based education from the beginning. As we engaged with Dewey’s *Experience and Education* and the Foxfire core practices during the Foxfire course for teachers, we quickly saw the connection between the two traditions and we were able to understand aspects of the core practice from the lens of democratic education in China. The above examples of Tao’s practice, for example, are a reflection of the core practice calling for student work to serve audiences beyond the classroom in action in the context of rural China.

THE NEED FOR DEMOCRATIC AND COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION

The context that we worked in and that moved us to pursue a more community-based curriculum is not dissimilar from the context that gave rise to the Foxfire approach. The students of the original Foxfire course have roots in Appalachian culture, which is stereotypically associated with “hillbillies”, ignorance and backwardness. Through their work, students discovered and gave voice to the cultural, historical and technological wisdom that elders of their communities hold, thereby disrupting the dominant narrative about their culture. In China, “rural” is similarly equated with “ignorant” and “backward”. Rural children and youth are increasingly disconnected from their communities and many view urban culture and lifestyles as superior. This disconnect is often exacerbated by their experiences in school. Many rural students have parents who live and work in far-away cities most of the year. This, coupled with the closing and consolidation of rural schools across the country has led to the rise in numbers of rural students who attend boarding schools. It is not uncommon for students attending rural boarding schools to return home only once or twice a month. This means that many rural children and youth spend nearly all of their time in school and very little time in their communities. Furthermore, school curriculum tends to be oriented towards the urban context and is not culturally relevant for rural students.

If education is to be a powerful part of the solution to the social and economic problems that rural areas in China face, then a major purpose of education should be to cultivate rural students as future leaders in their communities and beyond. The curriculum should be rooted in the realities of rural communities and should give students opportunities to engage with and participate in community life and issues. Our hope is that through community research and service-learning projects, rural students will come to understand, appreciate and see themselves as important members of their communities, while at the same time engaging in rigorous academic learning. Given this goal, the story of the original Foxfire cultural journalism project was very inspiring to us. We have also found the core practices to be a useful guide for integrating community-based education and engagement with academic disciplines.

CONSTRAINTS AND SPACES

The Foxfire Course for Teachers encourages teachers to recognize the constraints under which they must operate, while also identifying available spaces for practicing democratic education. The education system in China is historically exam-centered and education in the U.S. is becoming increasingly so. As practitioners of democratic education, we stand to benefit from sharing experiences in navigating the constraints and spaces of exam-oriented education systems. For example, we have taken advantage of a subject in China's national curriculum called "integrated practice" to implement community-based education. This subject is meant to be multidisciplinary and provide opportunities for applied learning. Most schools do not implement the subject because it takes time away from tested subjects. Nonetheless, we've found that couching what we do in the language of the national curriculum has helped us to connect with administrators and officials who might otherwise be more resistant. It also provides a way for teachers, administrators and officials to take credit for the work as an innovation in an area of the national curriculum that other schools and districts overlook.

The prevalence of boarding schools in rural China has also created new spaces for democratic education. Even at the elementary level, it is not uncommon for students to spend ten hours a day in the classroom, with very little time and space available for anything other than exam-oriented teaching. For students who board at school, there is some time available for community-based education projects outside of school hours which would otherwise be used as independent study time. One teacher that we collaborate with worked for some time as a nanny in a boarding school. She was responsible for caring for the students during time when they were not in the care of their teachers. A group of students opted to spend their after school hours working with her on an inquiry project about snails, which involved field observations, experiments, and internet research. At the end, the group went around to the dorm rooms before bed time, presenting their findings to the other boarding students.

Because of these common goals, needs and constraints, learning about the Foxfire approach to teaching and learning was inspiring, as it introduced us to a wealth of powerful examples of democratic education, and at the same time valuable in a practical sense, as the core practices provided a useful reference for evaluation and goal setting throughout our professional development process. The rest of this chapter will describe the context of RCEF community-based education projects and then share examples from our practice as they reflect specific core practices of the Foxfire approach.

THE FOXFIRE CORE PRACTICES IN ACTION

The examples described below are taken from the experiences of RCEF and our partner teachers in rural schools of Yongji County, which is located in central China.

All of the projects were based in boarding schools with both residential and non-residential students. The schools served primarily agricultural communities. Many of the students' parents live in cities in coastal provinces for most of the year. These students board at school and return home to their grandparents every other weekend. The projects included students from third to fifth grade. Projects that occurred during class time were limited to one grade level, whereas projects that took place during lunch break, afterschool hours and holidays sometimes included mixed-age groups. The length of time devoted to the projects ranged from one or two weeks, to the whole school year. Most of the projects took place during class time. In these cases, a project might take the shape of a unit of a particular subject with which the project most closely aligns with, while others reside in different subject areas at different stages of the project according to the specific activities students are engaged in and the disciplinary methods and concepts associated with those activities.

Our community education projects can be divided into two types: community research and service-learning. In community research projects, students investigate a particular aspect of their community's history, art and culture, natural environment or economic activity. Examples include projects on local architecture, folk art, beekeeping, and changes in rural family structure. These projects sometimes include a practice component, such as growing crops and raising animals as part of agricultural community research projects. In service-learning projects, students investigate a public issue that they are concerned about and take action to address the issue. The issue of focus can range in scope from the school level, such as improving meal options for boarding students in the school, to the village level, such as the smoking cessation campaign, or involve collaborating with students in a different part of the country as in the case of fundraising to support students of a low-resource school in their service-learning project.³

The examples shared below are organized around the core practices related to learner choice, community connection, and audience. This chapter does not address all of the core practice because of space limitations, and more importantly, because the purpose for sharing examples is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of the core practices as they relate to our practice, but rather to use a discussion of several core practices to illustrate their relevance and application in the context of Yongji County. Before proceeding, I would like to acknowledge that the core practices are addressed discretely here for the purpose of clarity although they are not as easily separated from one another in practice.

*From the beginning, learner choice, design, and revision infuses the work teachers and learners do together.*⁴

Making space for learner choice was a challenge for us. The hierarchy that separates teachers from students is generally more rigid in China than it is in the U.S. When working with teachers in China, I encourage teachers to take small steps and gradually expand their comfort zones starting from where they are. I present student choice as a continuum. Classrooms are never completely controlled by the

teacher or by students, and our projects represent a wide range of possibilities in between.

In the selection of a theme or issue, for example, we have done several community-research projects on prominent aspects of local economy and culture, such as a project on sweet potatoes and one about village architecture, in which the theme was solely determined by the teacher. To give an example on the other end of the spectrum, I have taught units that began with a process of student brainstorming and deliberation which led to the goal of the unit. In one such unit, I led the students on a walk around the school and village. The students then brainstormed a list of changes they would like to see. Based on that list, I facilitated a discussion about changes that they most wanted or needed as well as the feasibility of achieving them. The students decided that they wanted to focus on the need for more sports equipment in the school, and then further decided specifically that they would like to build a table tennis table. From there, the students consulted construction workers from the village regarding the materials they would need and the costs of those materials. They created a budget, then planned and implemented a fundraising campaign. After negotiating with the school principal, they identified a suitable location for the table and helped the construction workers to build it out of brick and cement. The table was well used not only by students and teachers, but also by villagers.

Many projects emerged from student interests but were suggested as a topic of study by the teacher. The boys in one teacher's class went through a period of fascination with bees and her classroom was littered with plastic bottles containing dead bees that the students had tried to raise. The teacher suggested that they do a community research project about bees and brought them to interview a local beekeeping household. Although the teacher initiated the project, it became very student driven, with the group of students approaching any teacher who was willing to take them to the beekeepers during lunch breaks. In another case, the students had learned about the negative impacts of smoking in social studies class and were assigned by their social studies teacher to share this information with smoking members of their family. To his surprise, the social studies teacher himself became the target of a persistent smoking cessation campaign! Seeing that students were interested in this topic, we decided to start a project. The project included students from third to sixth grade. A team of teachers collaborated on it, with one teacher working with each grade level. The teachers had differing levels of experience with service-learning and invited varying degrees of student choice. For example, the students conducted a survey of smoking habits in surrounding villages. In some classes, the teacher provided a list of questions for students to ask, whereas the students generated the survey questions in other classes.

When students make significant choices, they must also bear responsibility for those choices, which opens up opportunities for powerful learning moments. I had once worked with a group of students who decided to raise some chickens in the school yard. We bought the baby chicks when they were not old enough for their sex to be determined and ended up with a higher percentage of roosters than we

had hoped for. This led to a lot of aggressive behavior from the roosters when they matured, especially toward the hens. Some of the students were very concerned about this and raised the problem in a meeting. During an intense and difficult deliberation, the students decided to butcher some of the roosters and give them to the cooks so that everyone in the school could share in the meat for dinner. This was a very special occasion because students rarely had the chance to eat chicken. The students had strong reactions as they witnessed, and in some cases assisted in, the butchering of their roosters. The students met again to process their feelings and discuss the ethics of their earlier decision. During the discussions, students were passionately engaged and discussed with nuance the complex factors that went into the decision. Some came to the conclusion that it was unjust to butcher the roosters and decided not to eat the chicken that day. The quality of their deliberation would not have been the same if they were discussing a hypothetical or distant decision, instead of their own decision, the consequences of which they experienced on a visceral level.

The work teachers and students do together enables learners to make connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond their communities.

By connecting the curriculum with the communities that students belong to, both the immediate and the broad, we hope that students see the familiar in a new light, form new connections with those around them, and see themselves as part of a much larger world. Many of our community-based units focus on familiar aspects of students' everyday lives. Things that they see each day and may be curious about, but have not had the opportunity to explore deeply. Students are often amazed by the complexities and wonders hiding behind the veneer of familiarity, and come to see things they had taken for granted in a new light. One teacher led a project about local village architecture. Students discovered that architecture in their region is unique, observed and described many interesting details about houses in the village that they had not noticed before and learned about the construction process as well as the science behind specific designs.

Through community-based education, students also come to see people around them in a new light. The wisdom and expertise of rural people is too often dismissed. The community-based education projects purposefully created opportunities for students to interact with community members in ways that would allow them to form new relationships. As part of a project about sweet potatoes, a local staple crop, students interviewed an elderly man in the village. They came to see him not only as Grandpa Hou, but now also as a village historian who told them about the important role that sweet potatoes played in the survival of villagers during the famine of the 1950's. Neighbors assumed the roles of agricultural scientists and engineers as they demonstrated innovative techniques and tools they had developed and provided guidance to students while students undertook their own agricultural projects. Students gained new appreciation for the specialized skill, passed down through generations, that goes into making the sweet potato noodles that are a major

S. G. LAM

part of the local diet after observing, assisting and interviewing a local family that produces them. Students themselves have the opportunity to assume a new role in the community as they discuss public issues with adults, share knowledge with them and take an active role in improving the community.

Community-based education projects have created opportunities for students to connect with the world beyond their immediate communities in meaningful ways. A group of rural teachers and I led a professional development camp focused on community research and service learning. One participant was inspired by our case studies about agricultural projects to work with his students on raising chickens in their school. He worked in a rural boarding school in one of the poorest provinces in China and saw the project as something students could do to improve their meals at school which were severely lacking in protein. When teachers from another school who had also participated in the camp heard about this, they decided to work with their students on a fundraising project to support the chicken project. In the process, the teachers and students from two very different regions in China had the opportunity to work towards a common goal and learn about each other's lives and situations. In another example, a well-resourced school in California collaborated with our students on a project investigating local water quality. The school in California donated a set of equipment so that students in both schools could conduct the same tests, and then share their processes and findings with each other. Pen-pal projects that connect rural children with people from other parts of the country or beyond are not uncommon. In these arrangements, communication can remain at a superficial level and can be problematic if the pen pals are not sensitive to the wealth and lifestyle differences between them. By grounding the connection in community-based education projects, the students in two countries shared a common experience which provided material for richer conversation. They gained knowledge about an important aspect of their own and each other's' communities.

The work of the classroom serves audiences beyond the teacher, thereby evoking the best efforts by the learners and providing feedback for improving subsequent performances.

Students serve audiences beyond the teacher in the community-based education projects, be it their own classroom community, their villages, or beyond. By working towards goals that involve broader audiences, learning takes on an authentic purpose and students gain the opportunity to engage with diverse perspectives.

When thinking about audience for student work, it is easy to jump to how students might present the results of their inquiry. However, it is the interaction and feedback they receive during the process that has often been most fruitful as students have the chance to immediately adjust their methods and practice again. Many of the community-based education projects we have done involve interviews with adults. This step is challenging for some students. It requires them to interact with adults, some of whom are unfamiliar to them. They need to make clear the purpose of the interview and carry themselves in a confident and polite manner in order to be

taken seriously by the adults, who are not used to being approached by children for interviews. To be successful, students must have a clear idea of the information they hope to gain. While they may prepare initial questions beforehand, they need to think of their feet to follow up with probing questions that will yield interesting and useful insights. After interviews, students debrief with each other and teachers, reflecting on their performance based on the responses of interviewees and the information that was collected before moving on to further interviews.

Broader audiences motivate students not only because students are concerned about how their work will be received by others, but also because students often hope to compel their audience to act or change their thinking in order to reach a goal. This is clearly illustrated in one project where students practiced marketing a product. Our students who raised chickens were delighted to discover that some of their hens laid blue eggs. Students who board at the school each get one hardboiled egg for breakfast in the morning. Because of how unique these eggs were, the students wanted to sell them instead of simply adding them to the school's egg supply. We brought students to the outdoor market in a nearby city to sell their eggs. We had brought art supplies for making posters and students tried different tactics for marketing the eggs to passersby. After some time, a man who had bought some of their eggs returned to give them suggestions for how to better market them. He had brought with him one of their eggs, which he had hardboiled, and pointed out to students the various ways in which their eggs are superior. By incorporating his feedback, students became more effective at communicating with potential customers and were more successful at selling their eggs.

The motivation created by working towards an important goal is particularly salient in service-learning projects, where students strive to understand and address an issue that affects their lives and communities. Because of the public nature of these issues, service-learning projects necessarily involve communicating and collaborating with a broader audience. As part of the smoking cessation project, for example, students went to several surrounding villages and presented on the findings of their survey of smoking habits in those villages, the monetary and health costs of smoking, as well as effective practices and available resources for smoking cessation. After each presentation, the students involved reflected on their effectiveness based on audience responses and made revisions for the next presentation. In another example, students published a feature in the student newspaper about health and nutrition, including a report on opinions about the food served at school for boarding students and school staff. In response, the principal called a meeting with representatives of teachers, students and kitchen staff to recommend changes to the menu.

CONCLUSION

The Foxfire approach to teaching and learning reflects the collective wisdom derived from the practice and reflection of many teachers working in a wide range of settings. This has given rise to an approach that is full of vitality in the sense that

S. G. LAM

teachers in vastly different contexts can both use and contribute to the approach. The Foxfire approach is far from a cookie-cutter method: practitioners are encouraged to reflect on our own philosophies of education, acknowledge real constraints that operate in our contexts, identify spaces for democratic teaching and learning, and finally create ways to strengthen our practice using the core practice as guidance. This chapter reflects how my colleagues and I have engaged in such a process in rural China. Although the constraints of testing and hierarchical relationships that many democratic educators face are particularly entrenched in this context, we have nonetheless found the approach to be applicable and valuable. Regardless of where our work is rooted, the Foxfire community provides a rich platform for democratic educators with shared visions and challenges to share and critically engage with each other's experiences.

NOTES

- ¹ Boarding schools are common in rural China. The mass closing and consolidation of rural schools throughout the country has made it unsafe or infeasible for many rural students to travel to and from school each day.
- ² Some of the videos can be accessed with English subtitles at <http://www.ruralchina.org/videos>
- ³ The Rural China Education Foundation has created a handbook to support educators in rural China who are interested in integrating service-learning into their work. An English version of the handbook can be downloaded at <http://www.ruralchina.org/sites>
- ⁴ The Foxfire approach core practices can be accessed from the Foxfire Approach webpage at www.foxfire.org/teaching

REFERENCES

- Daykin, J. B. (2014). The glocalization of John Dewey's educational philosophy in republican-era China. *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 21(1).
- Foxfire Fund. (2009). *The Foxfire approach*. Retrieved from <https://www.foxfire.org/teaching>
- Keenan, B. C. (1977). *The Dewey experiment in China educational reform and political power in the early republic*. Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University.
- Kuhn, P. A. (1959). Tao Hsing-Chih, 1891–1946, An educational reformer. *Papers on China*, 13, 163–195.
- Starnes, B. A., & Paris, C. (2002). *From thinking to doing: The Foxfire core practices: Constructing a framework to teaching mandates through experience-based learning*. Mountain City, GA: Foxfire Fund.
- Su, Z. (1996). Teaching, learning, and reflective acting: A Dewey experiment in Chinese teacher education. *The Teachers College Record*, 98(1), 126–152.