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14. FROM ACTIVE LEARNING TO ACTIVIST LEARNING

Foxfire and the Bridge from Classroom to Community

I start with the Foxfire question: *What has been your most memorable learning experience?*

My answer is my weeklong experience of the Foxfire for College Professors. I already knew about Foxfire because they were a client of my consulting firm and I helped them write their strategic plan. Later I joined the board of directors, which I chaired in 2008–2009 For all that, I did not connect directly with the educational approach until I became a Senior Fellow at J. W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development and a professional leadership educator at the age of 58.

So, in summer 2008, I attended the Foxfire for College Professors workshop, under the tutelage of Cynthia McDermott and Hilton Smith. There I discovered that my considerable skills as a consultant and facilitator of strategic plans and organizational development were not sufficient to *teach* in a classroom setting. Instead, my early classes were marked by circular discussions and theatrical pirouettes on the part of the teacher (me). Foxfire helped me recognize that taking on the role of facilitator was one way to teach; still, absent content – what Foxfire calls givens – the resulting experience is an entertaining bull session that, hit or miss, may enlighten some as much as it may confuse others. So, first and foremost, Foxfire helped me sharpen my chops in the classroom. Secondly, it led me to discern the gap between active learning and community activism that is characteristic of Foxfire, and given my professional interests, instilled a desire to build a bridge from one to the other.

FOXFIRE & COMMUNITY

Foxfire has deep roots in community-centered movements of the 1960's and 70's (Oliver, 2011). As a pedagogy focused on democratic empowerment of learners (Wood, 1986, pp. 239–240), Foxfire embraced culture, an empowering sense of place, and appreciation for heritage and family. The pedagogical practices affirm for the community of students that what they do counts, that their work matters, and that the product they produce is above all their own. The approach helps learners see they can and should make a difference in this world and fosters a willingness of "each student to move beyond himself and his new understandings, finally, into an active,

H. Smith & J. C. McDermott (Eds.), The Foxfire Approach, 115–120.

caring relationship with others; to … make the world a better place in which to live" (Wood, 1986, p. 249).

Academic sources confirm the strong connection between Foxfire and its community. In his critical review of its first twenty years, John Puckett (1989) describes Foxfire as an "extraordinary union of school and community (p. 49) which had a discernable impact on community based economic development through land purchases on Highway 441 and Foxfire's strength as a brand, drawing visitors to Rabun County's varied attractions. Similarly, Julie Oliver (2011) observed that Foxfire occurred at the same time as a wave of political and cultural developments such as the Civil Rights movement, progressive education, and back to the land efforts as embodied by the Whole Earth Catalog and Mother Earth magazine. However, the decidedly non-political focus of Foxfire magazines and books belied a direct connection with social change efforts, such as these. Instead, Foxfire's social agenda was to chronicle, uplift and share Southern Appalachian culture (Oliver, p. 19).

The road not taken was teaching through activist learning by engagement with the contemporary community. Such engagement moves learning outside the classroom, in the form of individual and collective efforts to identify and address issues of common concern. For example, there is plentiful evidence that the natural resources of Rabun County were systematically exploited by the formation of Ga. Power lakes and the influx of outsiders who are part time residents and never vote:

Today, approximately 63% of the land in Rabun County is owned by the Federal government another 20% by Georgia Power (Rabun County Government, 2010; Rabun County Online 2010) and less than 20% is in private hands, a significant percentage of that being out-of-county second home owners and/or retirees. All of this lessens the political influence that the average Rabun County resident has through the power of his/her vote (Oliver, p. 47).

While such access to outside wealth may have created unique opportunities for educators in the community, it also increased the distance between these resources and longtime residents who, for generations, have enjoyed a unique culture and quality of life in Rabun County, GA.

Imagine the alternatives: What would happen, for example, if Foxfire students had chosen to study the Georgia Power Company or taken oral histories from the individuals who built second homes on land that once belonged to their grandparents? What if Foxfire had invested its money in local banks and partnered with local government and chamber of commerce to stimulate economic development? What have been the consequences (intended and unintended) of Foxfire's use of community history as the vehicle for active learning in the classroom instead of using contemporary opportunities and challenges in the community as a vehicle for activist learning?

Foxfire practice has occasionally bridged the boundary between active learning and activist learning. Puckett mentions several such projects in the early days of the program. In the mid 70's, the MABARLA project, (named for the three Foxfire

graduates Barbara Taylor, Mary Thomas and Laurie Brunson) worked for a full year investigating community problems and issues, published as two articles in the *Foxfire Magazine*. The first explored changes resulting from James Dickey's novel *Deliverance*, and the movie of the same name, especially the environmental effects and portrayal of local people as more animal than human as "foil for civilized society". The second documented the impact of change on Betty's Creek Valley. The authors concluded that growth in Rabun County was neither adequately planned nor restricted by zoning ordinances and foresaw the overdevelopment and misuse of land …" in the future (p. 45). Puckett notes that "subsequent Foxfire students have never matched the sustained involvement in current social issues of the MABARLA group" (p. 45).

In 1979, Foxfire aligned its pedagogy with a national movement around the theme of "empowerment" of students. Foxfire saw the increased potential for community engagement as an opportunity to "help students master the information they must have to be able to take their destinies into their own hands …" (Puckett, p. 112). The result was a twelve week class designed to create in students an awareness of change – why and how it occurs, what its political mechanisms are and how individual citizens can participate effectively in public decision making about change." To learn about change, students focused on real communities with real problems. Again, Puckett notes, "… ultimately this class remained a one shot effort and Foxfire did not offer any further social action courses" (Puckett, p. 114).

In 1981, Foxfire undertook an initiative known as the Mountain City Project which involved efforts to start a Community Development Corporation (CDC) to facilitate economic development and create jobs for local inhabitants of Foxfire's home community along with Rabun County. Foundations that had supported Foxfire's educational efforts declined to fund this project because Foxfire had a sizable (at that time) $500k endowment. Feasibility studies suggested best bet was refocusing on strategies for marketing and retailing Foxfire products (p. 117) rather than joining with local partners for more general economic development. The result was Foxfire Press, a publishing house for Foxfire materials in partnership with E. P. Dutton. Dutton also helped Foxfire set up a mail order business in RC that employed local people. While the Press had some success, the CDC idea foundered, in part due to lack of collaboration with local government and private sector partners. Collaboration among arts organizations was more positive, including the Southern Regional Catalog Marketing Conference on 1984, which led to a marketing collaborative called The Mountain Collection. So while there were partners in that effort, the benefits centered Foxfire's brand and core business, rather than a more generalized community engagement. Ultimately, Foxfire's governing board decided to discontinue the Mountain City Project in 1984[1] (Puckett, 1989).

Longevity is another indicator of Foxfire's engagement with community in activism that has sustained the Foxfire enterprise over the past 50 years. Numerous community members volunteer to support Foxfire activities, including the Foxfire classroom at Rabun County High School, special events like the Foxfire Mountaineer

Festival, and activities on the 106 acre Foxfire property, known familiarly as "The Land." Former students have settled in the vicinity to work and raise families. Finally, researchers at Emory University have found that knowing one's family history is a key contributor to resiliency (Feiler, 2013): people who have living connection to stories from their past are better able to handle life's setbacks than those who have little or no roots in history. In that way Foxfire's collection of interviews, photographs, music, artifacts and buildings serves as a memory bank for people who live in the North Georgia Mountains. Foxfire contributes to a sense of identity and rootedness in a rapidly homogenizing world (Rechtman, 2015).

The central avenue for community partnership for Foxfire students and their families is participation on the Foxfire Community Board and its governing board. While the two boards operate independently, they collaborate on most major decisions regarding disposition of the archives. For example, with the advent of the internet, Foxfire has an opportunity to share the primary research (transcripts, tape recordings, photos) created by the students on a larger scale. At the same time, community members are concerned about how such information would be used and whether the prejudices and practices of the elders might be used to discredit Appalachian life. Through a sometimes contentious discussion over approximately 12–16 months, the two boards resolved these issues (a) through an orientation to oral history ethics conducted by Dr. Cliff Kuhn, then Executive Director of the Oral History Association; (b) through the creation of a process for institutional review to consider requests for the data as part of the work of the Archives Committee; and (c) through a revision to Foxfire's informed consent document to include uses such as the internet (author's personal recollection). One result of this conversation is the posting of selected Foxfire archives on the Digital Library of Georgia website, part of the Digital Library of America (http://blog.dlg.galileo.usg.edu).

Whether responding to crisis or handling more routine concerns, Foxfire has consistently maintained a commitment to consensus decision making that considers community input into organizational policies and governance. The resulting process may be inefficient and at times uncomfortable: the obligations entailed in this process are likely contributors to Foxfire's long term survival by strengthening relationships with the community of interested stakeholders.

Engagement Beyond the Classroom

Activism is at once the best practice for and the acid test of engaged learning. This perspective situates engagement as a form of self-expression, or personal agency, as well as a set of operational activities. Engaging one's *self* with the purpose and intention requires application which begins in the formal setting and extends beyond to the activist-learner's way of being in, with and for the world he or she inhabits. Through trial, error, failure, almost-dids and outright success in real world settings, the learner builds the capacity to apply lessons learned in one context to other diverse and challenging contexts. Given that, the pressing question is: *how might Foxfire*

build a bridge from active learning to activism? At this point, I have more questions than answers. Here are just a few:

1. The classroom is an essentially private space where the teacher can undertake controlled experiments that facilitate learning. What happens for the teacher (as well as the learner) when such space becomes public? From the practicalities of workload management to potential for censure (especially in today's litigious environment), what training, support and incentives can help teachers and students move their learning into the real world?
2. Activism entails real risks for activists and the communities they serve. Yet a sense of safety is critical to taking risks in the interests of learning. What is the safety net for activist learners? How do they find time and guidance for reflection, for recovery from failed experiments, and celebration of success? What ethical concerns arise?
3. Activists build networks of likeminded associates, adherents, and trusted allies (called social capital) to advance their work in community. In the permanent record world of Facebook and Instagram, how do activist learners create a credible resume that serves job and career aspirations without alienating potential employers who disagree with positions they espoused during their school years?
4. Education is a public good (at least so far it is), with accountability to parents, tax payers, elected officials and professional administrators. Further the education process itself is a prime concern for activist learners and their teachers. Yet these diverse stakeholders rarely agree on how education should be done. How do all these stakeholders navigate these stormy seas? What happens when hopes collide? In a world where even well known facts are subject to debate, how do the varied stakeholders find ways to work and learn together? How do they distinguish signal from static, wisdom from witlessness, and achievement from almost-happened?
5. Bridging from active learning to activist learning by definition dissolves boundaries. Further, each student will have his or her own best way of learning, family context, and personal expectations. Finally, much content is given. How do we discern which givens and boundaries are worth keeping? Which to discard? Which elements lend themselves to activist learning? Which do not?
6. Frequently after school programs like 4-H, scouts, and interest groups like debate and science club help k-12 students experiment with activism and learn more about their own values, issues, and concerns. Student government, model legislatures, and internships provide applied leadership opportunities for young people. What might Foxfire bring to these programs that could create to a richer learning experience for participants?

So, in keeping with the Foxfire core practices, my reflection on the path from active learning to activist learning has spiraled into a more questions than answers. And, in the spirit of Foxfire, I invite colleagues to join this conversation. Just be prepared for the long haul, since we've been talking about this for nearly 50 years.

NOTE

[1] Joe Haban, staffer hired to support the CDC and raise money, continued to work with a consultant and Rabun County to launch a housing rehab program and other initiatives that could "with proper leadership and support of local government, grow into a bona fide county development office" that could be a conduit for state and federal grants for diverse projects (Puckett, 1989). This also was stillborn, raising questions that persist to this day about interest in and capacity to sustain collaborative community development in Rabun County.

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