

GEORGE WOOD

19. SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Reading through this collection of essays I was struck by three things:

- How widely applicable the Foxfire Core Practices are;
- The impact these practices have had on both teachers and students;
- That it was over 30 years ago that I first stumbled on the Foxfire approach as a professional.

Let's start with the applicability of the Core Practices. I first ran into them while sitting in Wig's Rabun Gap classroom watching him direct the magazine class. He was at his finest, moving from group to group of students, guiding their work, asking questions, pressing them to think and work harder. After checking in with the various teams, he called three students to the back of the room. They were about to benefit from one of his famous mini-lessons.

Turns out these three had been having on-going struggles with some piece of grammar that the class had worked on several times. Following the best of the Core Practices (while they had not been fleshed out in writing yet, they were easy to find in the classroom) Wig had been working on this grammar rule as it had come up in student writing. There had been an all class lesson using examples from the magazine articles students had written, and then a couple of whole group follow ups with more examples. But these three were still making the same error.

Time for some direct teaching. Wig had revised a series of sentences from the stories on which the class was working, so each demonstrated a way a grammar mistake had been made. Together they worked on these, one at a time, until he was convinced everyone had it. Off they went, back to work, equipped with one more writing skill.

I share this example because it illustrates something that goes through all of the Core Practices and can inform every classroom. Simply put, learners learn by making their own errors on work that they care about and are willing to correct those errors, even practice not making them, when the reward is high enough – as in, seeing your work in print.

This is why I believe the Core Practices are so applicable. At the time, some 30-plus years ago, Georgia was one of the first states to mandate state standards in content areas and mandate that teachers teach them. It was a sample of what was to come nation-wide. But even in the face of these state mandates – a set of standards that Wig had actually put on chart paper and put on the wall, checking each off as the

class mastered them (note that I did not say after the teacher taught them) – he stayed true to the Core Practices of Foxfire.

What I am getting at is that good teaching, teaching along the lines of the Foxfire Core Practices, trumps all else. In any setting, these practices work as demonstrated in the Foxfire Teacher Networks led by Hilton Smith. And under any regulatory system, be it mandated testing for graduation, promotion, or teacher pay, these principles light the way to student achievement. Beyond student success, the Core Practices have a profound effect on the lives of teachers and students.

I want to start with teachers, as they are often overlooked when we talk about schools. Outside of student socio-economic status, nothing is more important when it comes to student learning than the quality of the teachers they have. Amazingly this is a lesson seemingly unknown by most education reformers for the past thirty years. While they have tried to improve the overall quality of American public education by tinkering with testing, charter schools, and mandated curricula, these so-called reformers have ignored this fact.

Back in the 1970s when Ted Sizer, John Goodlad, and Ernest Boyer led the national Study of Schools, the evidence was overwhelming: Good teachers equal good results. Foxfire gets that. Look at the Core Practices, filled with demands that teachers be excellent as facilitators, collaborators, active learning, project learning, and real audiences. But there is something more here. When you put teachers in this role you empower them to be experts, to be masters of their own destiny, to feel a genuine sense of agency in their own classrooms.

Teaching via the Core Practices is not done by following a textbook or handing out worksheets. It is done through first knowing your content backwards and forwards. I remember reading the section of Wig's *Sometimes a Shining Moment* book where he admonished those interested in his approach to start with something they knew well and use the Foxfire approach there. Why, because just as John Dewey knew, teachers must have content at their fingertips so that their attention can be on the learner, not finding content.

That is the second demand the Core Practices put on teachers: knowing their students, the children in their room. Foxfire moves from student interest to content and skills, not the other way around. It is one of the purest models of Ted Sizer's notion of "student as working, teacher as coach". Again, this empowers teachers to use their own judgment in the classroom, based on knowing the children who sit around them.

In classrooms where teachers have control of content and know their children you will have powerful and skilled teachers. And you will have children engaged in learning.

The effect on learners is so clearly laid out by the essays in this book by Joy Phillips, Katie Lunsford, and Lacy Hunter Nix it seems unnecessarily repetitive to go over them again. I must say I loved Nix's description of herself as a student, with "almost stereotypical teenage hubris" focused on her work and ignoring all the hoopla that went on at that time around Foxfire. The ability of Nix and her compatriots to

see so vividly what their engagement with Foxfire meant to them is evidence that children benefited from classrooms where Foxfire and its many cousins (such as the Coalition of Essential Schools, Expeditionary Learning, Outdoor education) was practiced. Teachers and schools made a difference in their lives.

As pointed out in this volume, clearly these approaches connect to good test scores. But there is so much more. Children in learning communities such as these go on with confidence and an engaged mind—confidence to take on the roles of citizen, learner, community member with a mind nimble and thoughtful enough to guide them through the challenges and joys of life. This is what really matters in school, making a difference in the lives of our children, and the Core Principles of Foxfire increase drastically the chances that educators can make that difference.

Applicability. Impact. Now a word about longevity. The biographical note at the beginning of this essay was a reminder to myself of how long ago, but how recently it seems that Wig's *Sometimes a Shining Moment* was published. And it was twenty years before that that the first Foxfire magazine appeared. Fifty years, half a century, of tried and true practices that help children learn to use their minds well.

So many things have come and gone during these five decades. Fads such as Learning Activity Packages (LAPs, remember those?) and programs such as the federally funded Reading First; Channel One and Nation at Risk; small schools, schools without walls, charter schools, and Teach for America. We have an appetite, we Americans, for the shiny new object that is the key to fixing all our educational woes. Foxfire has lasted through all of these: growing, struggling, continuing, and now, while somewhat out of the national spotlight, thriving.

Why? Because it draws from the deep tradition of progressivism, with roots back to John Dewey, Ella Flag Young, George Counts and the Eight Year Study: an approach to teaching and learning that is based on the understanding that we all learn best from experience, that those experiences can be ordered and structured by a teacher who understands his/her students into a curriculum that will expand the child's mind and abilities. Foxfire builds on and adds to that tradition, with the Core Practices setting out a guideline for any progressive teacher or school to follow.

Beyond that, Foxfire lasts in the hearts and minds of those who have experienced it: Teachers whose professional lives have been vastly improved due to the new found respect they find in an approach that honors their wisdom, experience, and skill as a teacher; students who have found a sense of self-respect and empowerment when they see their words (or photos or art or some other project) set forth for public consumption; families who see children flourish when given the chance to be an active learner rather than a passive recipient of curriculum; and communities who are able to join in the education of their children by providing an area in which children can learn not only skills but can apply those skills for the good of all.

Foxfire and its Core Practices, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, are applicable in every school and classroom, can have a dramatic effect on both teachers and learners, and have withstood the test of time. So what are you waiting for? Dive in and find your own shining moment.