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8. CORE PRACTICES IN USE

Foxfire—definition: organic luminescence, especially from certain fungi on decaying wood.

Foxfire, as defined above, has to do with plants; and plants have to do with roots. As I think and write about the Foxfire Core Practices, I find myself often using some form of the word "root." I think that may be significant.

My best work, both as a teacher-learner and as a student-learner, is *rooted* in the Foxfire Core Practices. Those "*roots*" were not named for me until I experienced them during training to become a literacy coach. In 2002, our rural Georgia county was on board with Reading Recovery, a program of one-teacher/one-student intense reading instruction for at-risk first graders. The continuation of that effort to improve reading and writing instruction for all elementary grades was the reading and writing workshop model, based on the work of Irene Fountas, Gay Su Pinnell, Lucy Calkins, and others. This was to be a huge paradigm shift for teachers in our county, and so the decision was made to train literacy coaches to facilitate the shift. Two things eventually followed: my "formal" introduction to the Foxfire Core Practices and my "up close and personal" realization of just how complicated systemic school change really is.

Our instruction in "how to be a literacy coach and workshop teaching" was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Our group of twelve or so literacy coach trainees arrived for our first class with standard note taking apparatus in tow. Imagine our surprise when instead of settling in for initial lectures on how this new workshop model of teaching "worked" or how we were to "be" as literacy coaches, we were asked things like what time we wanted to begin and end class each day? How we wanted to read and respond to suggested readings? Whether we wanted to work in small groups, pairs, or alone? Our responses to these innocuous questions were blank stares; uncomfortable shuffling of papers, prolonged silence. Now I have come to recognize these responses as quite typical for anyone "schooled" in non-democratic settings…. the way most schooling has always been done, and for the most part, the way most schooling continues to be done today. And now, I also recognize this as Foxfire Core Practice One: "From the beginning, learner choice, design, and revision infuses the work teachers and learners do together." These small choices were the start of four years of the most intense, most uncomfortable at times,

H. Smith & J. C. McDermott (Eds.), The Foxfire Approach, 57–64.

most participatory opportunities for learning that I had ever experienced. Much later I learned that our "facilitators" were Foxfire trained, and were manifesting Foxfire Core Practice Four: "The teacher serves as facilitator and collaborator." These two shifts meant something very different was afoot. One, the "teacher" was not the "holder of the wisdom" who decided all the aspects of how and when said knowledge would be dispersed to those waiting to receive it (and regurgitate it on demand.) Two, the knowledge itself was not fully constructed—in its final form. The construction of that knowledge would flow from the collective understandings of all participants and be *rooted* (there's that word again) in our lived experiences. Now, this was something new. Oddly, however, when our group was sent for "further training" at another location under the tutelage of different instructors, our experience was very different—the aforementioned note-taking apparatus was very much required and we were told exactly what we were to think and do—and exactly how our success or failure at "absorbing" the wisdom would be evaluated. Like so many students in other venues, studying other disciplines, I felt my passion and interest in being a literacy coach and the workshop models of teaching begin to wane. And, in spite of a promising start to a generative way of learning and subsequent sharing of learning (one that involved passion and excitement, and the desire to dig deeper) this initiative died the death of so many promising initiatives: the paradigm of "thinking" was again replaced by "receiving"; the paradigm of "active participation" was replaced by "passive acquisition" and the endeavor lost its zest. A new superintendent, looking to "make his mark" summarily declared null and void in our county all workshop teaching and all literacy coaches. It was time to return to worksheets and basal readers—school as usual, back to basics, and all that. And, as you might imagine, the level of literacy in our county continues to decline, with the latest solution being the imposition of more demanding "standards" and more punitive consequences for teachers and schools who fail to deliver. Once again, the "*root*" of the issue is ignored.

Although my work as a literacy coach came to an end, my friendship with my first Foxfire facilitator did not. And in one of those strange life coincidences, my facilitator friend had a long acquaintance with my then-boyfriend, now-husband, Hilton Smith, who is a co-author of this book and a longtime Foxfire practitioner. It seems my Foxfire fate was sealed. In the summer of 2004, I, too, studied at the Foxfire Center on Black Rock Mountain, the site of the original Foxfire success story. And my involvement with Foxfire continues today as I try to apply the practices with prospective teacher candidates who are now my "students." Sometimes the result is a stunning community of learners where interest and passion run high for multicultural education or children's literature, or whatever curriculum aspect we are pursuing. Sometimes it does not. Elliott Wiggington, Foxfire's founder, captured this reality perfectly in the title of his highly reflective book, *Sometimes a Shining Moment.*

And in retrospect, when I reflected on the "shining moments" of my 34+ years of teaching in public and private elementary schools, with rich and poor students, in

urban and rural settings, the *roots* of those moments could be traced to the Foxfire Core Practices, although I did not know to define them in that way at that time. Three examples follow.

In a small private school on Maryland's eastern shore, we noticed a lack of apparent diversity in our second grade. My teaching partner and I decided to bring this to the attention of our small students by initially reading stories to them about children from different cultures, different countries. One student's response to a story about Native Americans elicited the response, "Hey, my dad is one-quarter Cherokee." This started the other students' queries about their respective heritages. Together we developed a plan for finding out about our ancestors. Parents got interested and involved. It turned out that there was much more diversity than was initially apparent and soon the hallways were adorned with child-sized paper dolls (holding hands, of course) decorated in renderings of the traditional garb indicative of each child's ancestors. The children, their parents, their siblings, and any other agreeable artists were included in the effort. But the research hardly stopped there: each child invited a guest speaker (usually a grandparent or parent, but not always) to tell stories, give information, share pictures or videos, and of course, bring traditional foods. We build a model of the Eifel tower, ate escargot, sampled buffalo meat, and were amazed by the ability of the Masai villagers to jump to such great heights. We located the geographic sites of origin and learned about not only the history but also the current events of each. The overarching "big learning" was that "different" does not have to be defined in terms of "good" or "bad", a concept that was absent before our study. In this "shining moment" it seemed all the Core Practices came into play. Core Practice One: choice (mom's ancestors or dad's), Core Practice Three: connections between the classroom work, and the world beyond the community; Core Practices Five and Six: active learning and creativity; Core Practices Seven and Eight: peer teaching, small group work, teamwork and an audience beyond the teacher (visitors to our "gallery" were numerous). Core Practices Nine and Ten: rigorous work and reflection were evident throughout. Core Practice Two, the work manifests the attributes of the academic discipline involved was also true in the instance. I am confident that the seeds of interest in history and geography were planted during that study. And, as the teacher, I was definitely a facilitator and a collaborator, not a "sage on the stage."

Another shining moment came about when our community was raising funds for a local hospital. The nearest one was about 40 minutes away and often those forty minutes often spelled the difference between a good outcome and a bad one. Our second graders wanted to contribute. Because our school was located near a popular summer tourist destination, most of our parents did not take summer vacations. Instead our school calendar provided for a winter break—just three weeks after the Christmas holidays. Bread machines were a new item in those days and our students took on the task of baking bread in four borrowed bread machines each day of the three weeks between Christmas vacation and winter break. The bread was frozen until the last day before winter break when our classroom became a bakery for a day

and we sold our loaves to students in other grades and to parents. Second graders ran the bakery, rotating the required jobs as cashiers, busboys, and servers. And our profits for the day (along with some healthy contributions/tips) went to the hospital capital campaign. Again, Foxfire's Core Practices were evident.

A third example involves young students teaching grandparents to use computers. There's nothing quite as magical as pairing youngsters with oldsters and the results were newsworthy. The local television channel sent reporters to capture this "shining moment" and we made the front page of the Sunday newspaper.

There were other equally compelling examples of the shining moments of my teaching career, and when I reconsidered them through a Foxfire lens, the Core Practices are easily depicted. I think that is why writing this chapter has been a task I've resisted. It seems that in the way the Common Core standards are interpreted and effected, there is little room for experiential learning like the examples described above. In so many places, especially in areas of low socioeconomic standing, the way to "meet the standards" has been internalized as something that shuns "mere experience" (John Dewey), for "genuine book learning." It is my opinion that "book learning" alone is rarely genuine or even learning. But somehow, perhaps more stridently than ever, this seems to be our prevailing paradigm. In too many schools, it seems almost impossible to envision the education without students spending long stints sitting in desks (to my mind, wholly unsuitable for the demands of young, growing bodies), the expectation of passivity and quiet (equally developmentally inappropriate), the prominence of books or workbooks (usually boring or unreadable) or even mindless technology, the demand for attention (please note that there is no need for "demand" when youngsters are truly engaged), the teacher as sage and knower of all content (and absolutely responsible for whether or not learning takes place—that explains why we can hold him/her "accountable" – because if teachers are deemed responsible, then surely they are accountable) and so on ad nauseum. Where is the choice? The connections? The active learning? The creativity and imagination? The audience beyond the teacher? The ongoing assessment by the participants (not *of* the participants) but through their own reflection? Too often, it's not there. A wise person, (OK, it was my husband, Hilton Smith) once said that when we do something for a child that he or she could do for himself/herself, we rob that child of a learning opportunity. It seems by not attending to the precepts of Foxfire's Core Practices, by handing the responsibility for the learning to the teacher alone instead of sharing the responsibility with the students, their parents, the community, we rob everyone of opportunities to learn. And so, I am discouraged. When one has been a part of something as inspiration and wonderful as a "shining moment" or what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms "being in the flow", it is impossible to substitute the boredom and disconnectedness that describes the students and teachers in so many of the classrooms I observe today. I am appalled to think of my precious grandchildren housed in schools that too often seem more like prisons. Prisons where curiosity, creativity, and a healthy sense of self-efficacy are regularly executed. And if we don't want our grandchildren there, we shouldn't want any children there.

The foregoing is the rant that has dominated my thinking for several years now. But as I write this chapter, I'm convinced more than ever that the *roots* of a more positive school experience lie within the Core Practices.

We can get back to the *roots* of durable and engaging education by reflecting on the times in our own lives that resulted in real learning. But in order to do that we must shake off the shackles of prescribed curriculum and methodologies, punitive threats against schools and teachers, and trust capable teachers who love and care about children to create the opportunities where true learning can and does happen.

But wait, I must reflect (Core Practice 10). The students of today and the prospective teachers of today have had different experiences than I have had, so perhaps they CAN work in a different, generative ways. One way to get back to this "bottom line" might be to examine what has been the kind of true learning, at its *root,* that each of us has experienced. Let's take a look at that kind of personal learning with a Foxfire perspective.

In the Foxfire Course for Teachers, there is an activity called "Memorable Experiences" where participants reflect on a learning experience that was particularly "memorable" because it was very "good" (empowering, engaging, fulfilling) and resulted in durable learning and in the desire to pursue the field of study further. Alternatively, it was very "bad" (embarrassing, discouraging, belittling, boring) and resulted in a thorough disconnection from the topic at hand. Hundreds of participants in Foxfire courses for Teachers have recounted their memorable experiences. When analyzed for the traits present in the "good" experiences or for the traits that were missing in the "bad" experiences, there are compellingly similar lists across ages, disciplines, and ethnicities. For the most part, these traits are captured in Foxfire's Core Practices.

An example of a durable learning experience for me was *rooted* in my desire to learn to cook biscuits for my daddy. I was eight years old at the time. My mother's directions were simple, including the following:

1. Make a mountain of flour like a volcano.
2. Put a hole in the top.
3. Shape the fat like a big egg and put it in the hole.
4. Pour one cup of milk over all like the lava of a volcano.
5. Squish it all together with your fingers until it is like dough.
6. Pat out the biscuits.

She modeled the process for me several times as I watched and listened to her. My first attempt on my own (planned to be a surprise) was a disaster. I confused "broil" and "bake" when I set the oven. My patient mom applauded by attempt and taught me how to recover the good bread under the burnt tops. In just a few minutes, I proudly served my daddy my first biscuits. I still bake biscuits to this day and every time I do, I recall this experience. And I've gone on to be a fairly accomplished cook—and find much joy and satisfaction in cooking.

What does this experience have to do with Foxfire's Core Practices? Core Practice One is choice. It was my choice to learn to cook biscuits, not something someone else insisted that I do. So how do we reconcile the importance of choice to the dictates of what must be learned by students in schools? That's a good question and has at its heart the bigger question of whether or not compulsory education, particularly education for which the highest and best goal is presumed to be college attendance. This question is especially weighty for older students. But putting this particular controversy aside for a bit, perhaps we can agree that while choice of content may not be possible in all or even most education settings, choice of method or timing or sequence or assessment can generally be negotiated. Perhaps the involvement of the learner in any part of the decision-making process sends a message that the learner has ownership of at least part of the learning process. Without this essential concession, learning becomes something that is done "to" the learner, not "with" the learner. Unfortunately, this subtly indicates that his/her cooperation or even participation is not necessarily essential. And in actuality, nothing could be further from the truth.

Core Practice Two refers to "habits of mind" of the learning. In my example of learning to make biscuits, part of this "habit" was to recover from mistakes when possible. In a broad sense, this is the scientific method—to learn from the outcomes of each attempt to frame further attempts. In my cooking, this means I'm always looking for ways to recover my cooking experiments when they go bad as well as learning and improving my culinary expertise based on every cooking experience I've had. It's my cooking "habit of mind" that I attribute first to the experience of learning to cook biscuits. I would offer that "habits of mind" are the rooted in learning experiences of lasting value, regardless of the subject.

Core Practice Three is about connections. The connection of my daddy's favorite food (he once said if he could have hot biscuits every day, he wouldn't care what else he had to eat all day) and my desire to show my love for him is quite evident. In the larger context of schooling, when students make connections to their own lives that they deem important, the topics inherently have more traction…more reason for their attention. So often we skip this step: "you're in tenth grade, geometry is in the curriculum, therefore you will learn geometry…" rather than finding possible connections to real lived experience. Please note that making these connections "for" the students is another example of robbing the student of the learning opportunity. Involve the students in the exploration of how the study of the topic at hand may have or could have connections with his/her life. The teacher cannot begin to know all possibilities that exist for students. But seeking out the connections…making it clear that having connections is important….is a big part of the work that teachers and students must do together. Disconnected lessons are transient at best.

Core Practice Four speaks to the teacher's role as facilitator and collaborator. I would like to offer that this Core Practice has to do more with how the teacher is perceived by the learner than by any specific pedagogical moves the teacher may make or avoid. My mother "taught" me to make the biscuits by modeling, repetition,

and revision. Her directions were clear and within my zone of proximal development. She used praise and positive reinforcement liberally. The collective result of these actions was that I felt supported as a learner. Contrast this with a teacher who is not a facilitator and collaborator: someone who "covers" the content without care as to whether or not it was understood by the learner; someone who does not attempt to understand possible causes of confusion or mistakes; someone who has narrowly defined expected outcomes even before the instruction takes place; someone who does not have a relationship with the learner. Big difference!

Core Practice Five, active learning, is easily seen in my example. I didn't just listen to my mother's directions about making biscuits, or read how to make biscuits from a cookbook or watch a video about making biscuits. I made biscuits! Active learning means involvement. And involvement means thinking. It may not always involve bodily action, but it does always involve thinking.

Core Practice Six, which highlights imagination and creativity seems to be the one most often downplayed in today's reach for academic world domination. And that is such an oddity. Consider China, for example where math and science scores are very high, yet creativity is low. Chinese educators are seeking ways to expand students' capacities for creative thought through the arts and music and sports while western educators seem bent on eliminating these same sources. Back to my example, once I learned to make biscuits, my mom helped me expand the basic recipe to dumplings, to piecrusts, to toppings for cobblers, to pizza crust, to bread sticks, and so on. I'm pretty sure the root of my creativity with cooking started with learning to make biscuits for my dad.

Core Practice Eight, having an audience beyond the teacher, has proved to be one of the most stimulating practices for both my students and for me. I remember when I first heard about this practice, it seemed really odd to me. Things learned in school stayed in school, right? Other than the yearly program for parents, I didn't think much about the motivational effect of ensuring that there would be a real audience for sharing what we had learned. Yet, when I reviewed my "shining moments" there was ALWAYS an outside audience. And, of course, back to my biscuit example, what better audience than my dad?

Core Practice Nine involves assessment and evaluation, but somehow when taken in the complete Foxfire context, assessment and evaluation is different from usual school assessment and evaluation. Again, it seems to me that it's about the motivation behind the assessment and evaluation. Engaged and motivated students seek out assessment and evaluation in order to continually learn more, improve performance, and move to wider understandings. In other contexts, assessment and evaluation involves more of a static mentality – a report from which there is no motivation to learn from errors and move forward to greater learning. A connection here could also be made to the popular work of Carolyn Dweck whose "mindset theory" values effort—often repeated effort in the form of practice – over "natural talent." And, my biscuit example holds: assessment and evaluation of the quality of every pan of biscuits is welcomed as a way to ever widening proficiency.

And lastly, Core Practice Ten is reflection. To move from one experience to another without reflection is a bit like stringing pearls onto a string with no knot. It is within reflection that the fruits of our endeavors are appreciated, and the myriad of ways that that our experiences can be continued, changed, enhanced, and shared is revealed. Learning without reflection is mindless. I can assure you that my daddy and I both reflected often and fondly on that first pan of biscuits, and what is learning if not joyous? The Foxfire Core Practices hold the potential to return joy to the pursuit of learning.