

# Bridging the School-Community Gap: The Lessons of Foxfire

**F**oxfire originated in the English and journalism classes of a single teacher in rural North Georgia in the 1960s. Frustrated with the curricular status quo, Eliot Wigginton and his high school students began the publication of a popular journal of community oral history, folklore, and folklife. Wigginton served as project advisor, but the students themselves did the work. With cameras and tape recorders in hand, students field-collected the raw materials for their journal from living repositories of the old "mountain culture." They transcribed and edited their data into articles with such titles as "Moonshining as a Fine Art," "Log Cabin Construction," and "Planting by the Signs." Student motivation was high, community acceptance of the journal was excellent, and *Foxfire* was launched.<sup>1</sup>

With little financial support from the school, *Foxfire* struggled for existence from 1967 to 1972. Then hard times ended abruptly when Doubleday published *The Foxfire Book*, the first of five book-length anthologies. Since then, the success of these publications has been nothing short of phenomenal. Total sales from *The Foxfire Book* now approach three million copies, with additional millions from subsequent anthologies. These student-produced journals account for the most significant single share of the revenues of one of the country's largest publishing houses and only God and Doubleday know when it all will end.<sup>2</sup>

The success of *Foxfire* is fairly well known. Less familiar is the story of the general spread of the Foxfire-pattern project as grassroots curriculum innovation since 1971. In the fall of 1979 there were at least 180 *Foxfire*-like publications (often called "cultural journalism"). They are scattered widely across the United

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States in communities and classrooms, from grades 4 through 12. There are inner-city Foxfires (*Cityscape* and *Streetlight*), rural and small-town projects (*Bittersweet*, *Salt*, *Loblolly*, and *Out of the Dark*), and suburban journals (such as *From Snake Hill to Spring Bank*). As a form of curriculum innovation, cultural journalism draws power from ethnic pride and sense of place. Thus, there is a plethora of culturally distinct Foxfires, including the Navaho *Tsa'Aszi*, the Eskimo *Kalikaq Yugnek*, the Mexican American *Adobe*, the Choctaw *Nanih Waiya*, the Hawaiian *Mo'Olelo*, and the Cajun/Creole *Lagniappe*.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1975 there have been further innovations in at least two directions. As McLuhan might have predicted, an increasing and influential number of *Foxfire*'s descendants are appearing in such electronic media as slide-tape, super-8 film, and videotape. Some of these projects have even attained award-winning competence in their chosen format. Secondly, the *Foxfire* formula is proving to be a useful teaching concept in the elementary grades.<sup>4</sup>

Until recently, the educational establishment paid little attention to the classroom-based oral history/folklore journal as curriculum innovation. Its success, however, has led

to growing recognition of cultural journalism's unique perspective of two important elements: (1) the conventional process of educational innovation and curriculum design, and (2) the customary relationships between classrooms and communities, education and experience—between the textbook realities of the school and the social realities of the world outside the school. The questions now are "What lessons may we learn from the *Foxfire* projects?" and "What do they suggest for the field of curriculum development?"

*Lesson I: The conventional school curriculum has largely ignored the local community.* At least since the growth of the modern bureaucratic school (Tyack's "one best system"), there has been a general tendency to design our curricula and teach our classes in a manner that barely acknowledges the existence of the community outside the school.<sup>5</sup> The strange gap between education and experience, school and community, to which Dewey and the other Progressives so objected, still persists. Yet the success of cultural journalism in utilizing community resources for material and community pride for student motivation suggests what might be done.

*Lesson II: School-based fieldwork projects patterned after Foxfire can operate to build a "curricular bridge" between the world of the textbook and the realities to which students go home each day.* The basic *Foxfire* process can be adapted to produce a different product—a "local studies" curriculum instead of a journal of oral history and folklore. The school could use its own technical and human resources to generate a "community-specific curriculum" with which to bridge the gap between classroom and community. The idea, of course, is not to replace the textbook, but to supplement it with materials gathered from the community by way of student field projects. The

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Foxfire process  
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school itself is best suited to judge its curricular needs in this area and strategically situated to fulfill those needs.<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, in United States history classes, students and teacher might use the fieldwork methods of oral history to record a variety of personal testimonies about community life in 20th century America. Tapes and transcripts might be used to add immediacy and detail to such general topics as the Great Depression, the world wars, Korea, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, and Vietnam. In all cases, historical testimony should be derived from the personal experiences of individuals in the community who are part of the real world outside the classroom and textbook.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, nowhere is the sense of lost opportunities so strong as in our conventional approaches to the teaching

of history. As Eliot Wigginton observes.

... the American history teacher who drags students through text explanations of the Depressions, WPA camps, labor unions, or the World Wars, and ignores the fact that the community surrounding the school is full of people *who were there*, is being almost criminally negligent. All the songs, the folklore, the experiences and the tales are left out, and what a loss.<sup>8</sup>

This observation holds true with equal force in other disciplines. In home economics, classroom-based projects might locate master practitioners of community folk arts and crafts, traditional skills with immediate application to home economics. Those crafts include weaving, basketry, quilting, and food preservation, to name a few. Craftspersons might be recorded on tape or film to incorporate their knowledge into the formal home economics curriculum,

supplemented with other community-specific materials, to help preserve folk crafts from oblivion.<sup>9</sup>

English classes, too, might collect a variety of "oral literature" from the living body of community lore, in the form of legends, "belief tales," ballads, jokes, riddles, or other genres. Integrated with formal coursework in literature, this material could open new possibilities for studying the folk origins of verbal art.<sup>10</sup> Reading classes might record the colorful oral autobiographies of community residents and transcribe, edit, and photocopy them to create community-specific reading materials.<sup>11</sup> This material might then be used to bridge the gap between written and spoken words and effectively link the act of reading to the living language(s) of the community, whatever its cultural diversity.

The need for community-specific curriculum seems most acute where the gap between textbook and community culture is at its widest. Students who are culturally and linguistically different from the mainstream, middle-class patterns often have a more difficult time adjusting to the circumstances of their school. The "shock of institutionalization" is clearly greater for such students. Ethnic studies are a step in the right direction, but even they are often insensitive to regional and community variation in ethnic or linguistic subcultures. Bilingual and "brown studies" materials, for example, seem to have been designed in terms of some monolithic notion of Chicano language and culture, glossing over or ignoring the regional variations in Hispanic subcultures, and impairing the teaching effectiveness of the materials. Whatever the community variations in language or culture, the *Foxfire* process can generate a curriculum representative of the real-world diversity. Considering the purposes of bilingual/bicultural materials, the best of such curriculums are always community-specific.

It follows that the school itself is best equipped to make use of community resources and provide supplementary materials. Given the chance and the initiative, students can field-research and produce journalistic and audiovisual products of high quality. Most secondary schools are adequately supplied with the technical hardware necessary for the job. This includes typewriters, tape recorders, photo duplication equipment, and so on. The school's human resources are also adaptable to the task. Teachers may assess their curricular needs and desires and then work with students to design and implement field projects to fulfill those needs. Likewise, students are the ideal field researchers of community life, since they are personally linked to every social strata and ethnic subgroup within the community, and have a degree of access to community residents that would take outsiders years to match.

*Lesson III: In building this curricular bridge between classroom and community, the field work process is as important as its product.* At the heart of the *Foxfire* idea is the process of student fieldwork in the community—a form of experiential edu-



cation. The fieldwork process does as much to build the curricular bridge as the final product. Indeed, the potential of the classroom-based curriculum project would be seriously undermined if it were conceived as a "one shot" affair, producing a finite curriculum and then abandoned. On the contrary, the building of the curricular bridge should be ongoing, continuously updating and supplementing the formal curriculum with materials drawn from the living fabric of community social life, through the medium of student fieldwork.

The central lesson of *Foxfire* is that the "best" curriculum reform often may be school and community-specific; the tools of reform are already in our hands. ■

<sup>1</sup> For a general discussion of the rise of *Foxfire* and its descendants, see: Thad Sitton, "The *Foxfire*-Concept Publications, A First Appraisal." Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1978; also, Thad Sitton, "Descendants of *Foxfire*," *The Oral History Review* 1978 (Burlington, Vt.: The Oral History Association, 1978), pp. 20-35.

<sup>2</sup> Thad Sitton, "The Salt Book and Bittersweet Country: A Review," *The Oral History Review* 1979 (Burlington, Vt.: The Oral History Association, 1979), pp. 57-59.

<sup>3</sup> A complete list of cultural journalism may be obtained from Sherrod Reynolds, The *Foxfire* Fund, Inc., Rabun Gap, Ga. 30568. The addresses of cultural journalism projects mentioned are: *Salt*, Inc., Box 302A, Kennebunkport, Maine 04046; *Bittersweet*, Lebanon High School, Lebanon, Mo.

65536; *Loblolly*, Box 88, Gary, Texas 75643; *Cityscape*, Duke Ellington School of the Arts, 35th and R Streets, Washington, D.C. 20007; *Streetlight*, Metro High School, 233 North Michigan, Chicago, Ill. 60601; *Out of the Dark*, Northern Cambrid High School, Barnesboro, Pa. 95714; *From Snake Hill to Spring Bank*, Groveton High School, 6500 Quander Road, Alexandria, Va. 22307; *Tsa'Aszi*, Pine Hill High School, P.O. Box 248, Ramah, N.M. 87321; *Kalikaq Yugnek*, Bethel Regional High School, Bethel, Alaska 99559; *Adobe*, Centennial High School, P.O. Box 495, San Luis, Colo. 81152; *Nanih Waiya*, Choctaw Central High School, Route 7, Box 72, Philadelphia, Miss. 39850; *Mo'Olelo*, Kauai High School, Rural Route 1, Box 215, Lihue, Hawaii 96766; *Lagniappe*, Chamberline Elementary School, West Baton Rouge, La. 70815; "The Skewarkians," Bear Grass School, Route 4, Box 336, Williamston, N.C. 27892; "Project Wilberly," Minnechaug Regional High School, 621 Main Street, Wilbraham, Mass. 01095; "Jeff-Vander-Lou," 2953 Dr. M. L. King Drive, St. Louis, Mo. 63106.

<sup>4</sup> Sherrod Reynolds, "Golden Hind-sight, Hometown, Lagniappe, et al.," *Teacher* 96 (1979): 68-71; Thad Sitton, "The Fire that Lit Up Learning," *Teacher* 96 (1979): 65-67.

<sup>5</sup> David Tyack, *The One Best System* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> *Foxfire* itself is presently exploring these possibilities. A special course has been initiated for secondary school students at Rabun County School, during which the students design language arts and social studies materials for use in county elementary schools.

<sup>7</sup> For a specific application of this idea, see: Thad Sitton, "Windows Into Time: Creating a Historic Photograph Archive," *The Social Studies* 70 (1979): 275-280.

<sup>8</sup> Eliot Wigginton, "Foxfire," *South-ern Exposure* 5 (1977): 187-189.

<sup>9</sup> It should be obvious that many folk crafts would be highly appropriate objects for study in industrial arts.

<sup>10</sup> Many of these possibilities are explored in an excellent recent manual for student field-collection in folklore. See: Richard and Laura Tallman, *Country Folks: A Handbook for Student Folklore Collectors* (Batesville, Ark.: Arkansas College Folklore Archive Publications, 1978). Also see: Thad Sitton and Jan Jefer, "Discovering Children's Folklore: A Primer for Teachers," *Teacher* 97 (1980): 58-61.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of this process, see: Thad Sitton, "The Oral Life History: From Tape to Type," *The Social Studies* (in press).

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