

On 25 Years of Foxfire: A Conversation with Eliot Wigginton

Named a MacArthur Fellow in 1989, Eliot Wigginton began in 1966 to lead his Rabun County, Georgia, students to collect oral history for their magazine, *Foxfire*, and later to publish the Foxfire books. As other teachers replicated his work, "Wig" began to discover that the central issue was not making magazines but a process of instruction with a long history. Now he and his staff members have set up nine regional networks for teachers who want to test this pedagogy in a variety of K-12 settings. Here "Wig" and the students who did the initial work for a book to celebrate Foxfire's birthday in 1991 describe their work together.



As a new teacher, you thought the kids were really resistant to learning. But you kept finding ways to reach them. Why were they resistant?

The majority of students going into the 9th grade—and I think most-English teachers would agree—have decided that English is not something they're going to enjoy very much. It's typical to find kids—who have already been taken through the old system of reading a story and answering the questions in the back, writing compositions about assigned topics, and having their work cut up and criticized constantly—who feel English isn't something for them.

So why did you keep trying until you found something that worked? You must have been determined.

Well, I wasn't. If you're a first-year teacher, you want to at least survive, because you have a resume to think about. And you want to be able to finish up with some honor. I didn't have any particular mission—it was a question of survival, I think, more than anything.

But there was a process that I put the students through—a process that, until recently, I didn't realize was transferable and, in fact, philosophically critical, but it was—and I did it badly the first year.

How would you describe it?

In the beginning, it was a series of discussions we had, each of which hinged on a different question that was intended to focus the work. Question No. 1 is "What's writing for?" You make a list of all the places you see it in the real world—brainstorming. And sometimes that list is hundreds of items long. When the students see the array of stuff that's possible, they make a connection between writing and the real world.

The next step is "Okay, pick one, what do you want to do?" When they pick one, then it's their choice. In this case they picked magazines, and I said, "All right, let's brainstorm all the possibilities for what could be in it." A lot of the ideas about having local material in there, superstitions and all that kind of thing, were student suggestions. If I had laid the idea on the students, the table of contents would have been what I have already seen in school literary magazines: haiku poems and some short stories—that would be it.

This piece of the process is critical because quite frequently the students' ideas will be fresh, lively, unencumbered, no baggage. If the students hadn't suggested that kind of material, there wouldn't be a Foxfire program today, and I'd be selling shoes somewhere in Atlanta or something.

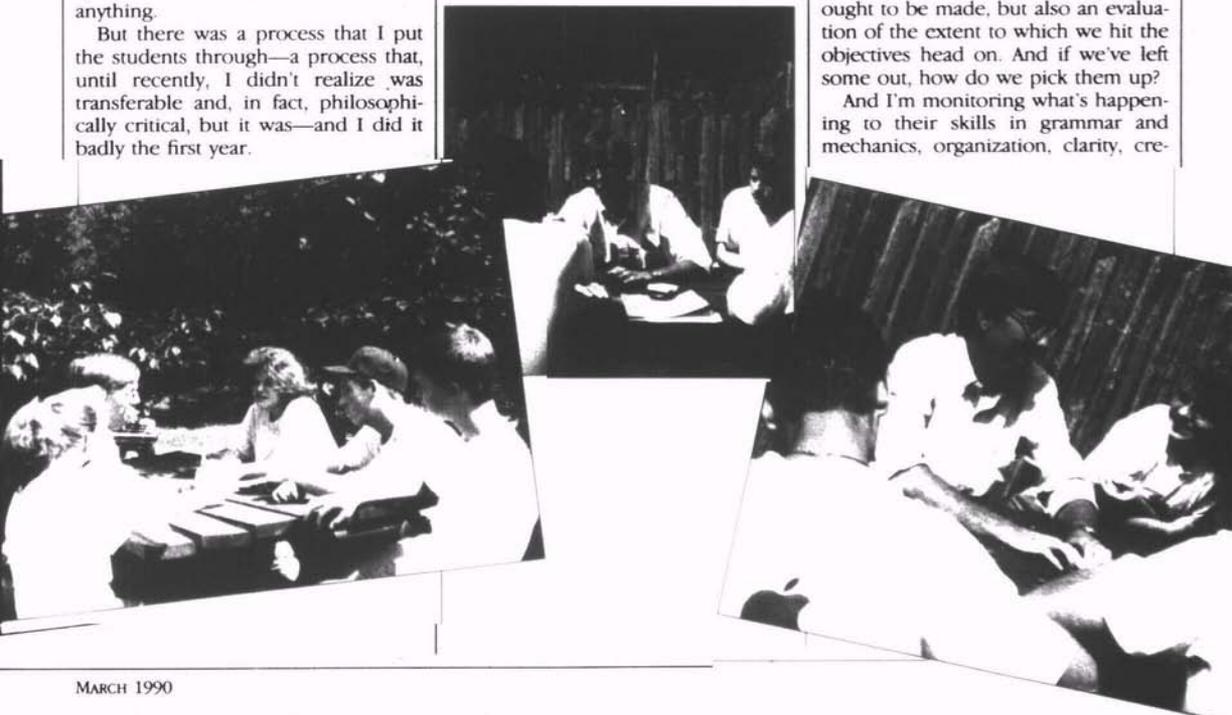
The next piece of the process is a set of questions like "How are we going to do it? How much is it going to cost? Where are we going to get the money? How are we going to get permission? How do we divide up the duties?"

Do you make some sort of formal plan?

The plan emerges, and all the while you're relating the content and the plan to state objectives. The objectives are used to design the work so that what the students do is actually put those objectives to work in a real way, instead of endless practice against the day when they might be able to do something useful with them.

And the next step is execution and then evaluation, not only to see how the teams worked, and what revisions ought to be made, but also an evaluation of the extent to which we hit the objectives head on. And if we've left some out, how do we pick them up?

And I'm monitoring what's happening to their skills in grammar and mechanics, organization, clarity, cre-



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activity, and use of the language. The goal is not to pass some kids and fail others but to identify those for whom some of this stuff is still a dilemma and make the mission of the class to get everybody across the finish line at the same time. Leigh Ann, for example, will go through the whole process, then do a little article about her grandparents and their Christmas traditions. Then I ask, "What do you now know how to do? What are you still fuzzy on? How do we build that dilemma into the next thing you do to give you more practice in that area?"

And we add six or eight more objectives to the next project, just keep adding to it. Dewey says to help the experiences that the kids have get "thicker," so that when they get older, after college, their experiences play out into something that resembles wisdom, judgment, sophistication.

The key ingredient is hooking those experiences each to the other. Working through that process, you can get students to the point where they can, in fact, write a book that's going to be published. They don't have to wait until they get out of college, after years and years of practice, to do something like that. What they're involved in is not practice but doing things for real consumption by the outside world. Their projects are just smaller in scale in the beginning stages, and then you build on and thicken those.

And you've found out this process can work outside Rabun Gap?

When the first book came out in '72, teachers from all over the country began to ask how they could do something similar. I didn't really know what I was doing, so I sent them a book by a teacher I had been working with in Maine who had done a similar project with her kids in Kennebunkport. It takes you all the way through the business of putting a magazine together step by step: how to do an interview, how to use a tape recorder, how to create questions, how to build a darkroom, how to use the darkroom.

The teachers began using this book as a manual and putting out magazines. But the students weren't enjoying the work, so teachers were coming to me, saying, "I thought this would work, and it didn't work for me at all." And I kept saying, "What did you do?" What had happened was that the teachers had made the decision there was going to be a magazine. The teachers had decided it was going to look like *Foxfire*, the teachers had selected the names, the teachers had selected what the contents of the first issue were going to be. And they handed the articles out as assignments on the first day of class, and it was just like homework.

That wasn't exactly the idea.

Not exactly! So I quit working with teachers. But I got a little bit more thoughtful. The reason they had gotten off the track wasn't their fault but mine, because the only information I'd given them was not good enough. I began to think about doing a book for teachers and took a sabbatical for six months, went down to Athens, and wrote the book [*Sometimes A Shining Moment*], which was an attempt to wrestle with the philosophy and the process that had led to the creation of *Foxfire* instead of a book about how to create thousands more of the same.

After the book came out, we were offered a grant from the Bingham Trust, where the trustees were interested in literacy development. I laid out to them a whole different system, a whole different way of working with teachers, and they liked the idea. The results were the networks, and the

courses, and now the examples that we use in those courses by and large are not *Foxfire Magazine* examples.

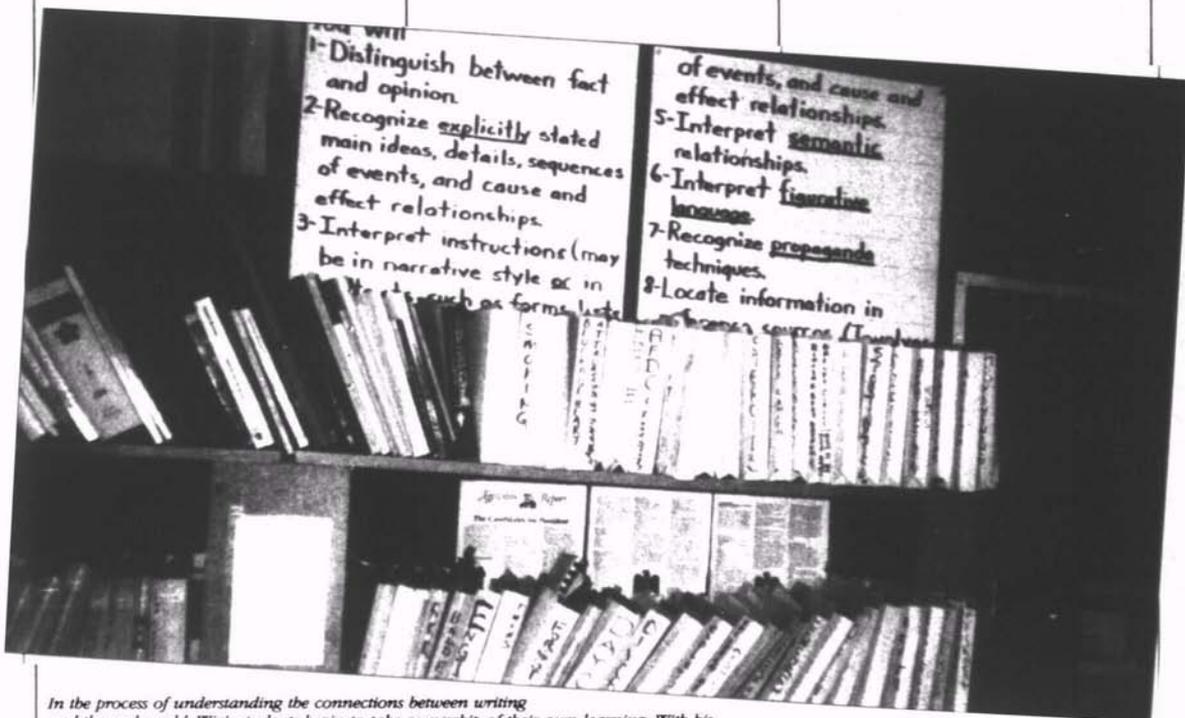
One of the key ingredients in our work with students is the collaboration we create instead of the teacher-directed, teacher-dominated, traditional talk-down situation, which doesn't resemble the way people learn in the real world. Learning is basically a social enterprise, and all the great educational philosophers have reiterated that point over and over again. All the evidence is there. But most teachers just don't know how to do it . . .

Never having experienced it . . .

Or never having analyzed it, never having thought about how they might bring specifically what was happening in that learning situation to their own teaching or, or, or, there're a thousand "yes, but's."

In *Sometimes A Shining Moment*, I felt your determination—it's not too strong a word—you had to go in there, the kids were going to be there, you wanted to teach. You had some faith that what you were doing was important. And if you could reach the students, they could share that feeling with you.

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In the process of understanding the connections between writing and the real world, Wig's students begin to take ownership of their own learning. With his guidance, they figure out where their skills are "still fuzzy" and how to ensure more practice where they need it.

But see, that's the opposite direction—that's like the wrong way around. It's really *they themselves*, through your questions, who identify for themselves why the work is important. When they look at a list on a chalkboard of 200 ways writing is used in the real world, everything from the tray liners at McDonald's all the way through . . .

So it reorients them, you think?

It makes them understand what the real world connection is to what's going on in the classroom. Teachers can talk till they're hoarse, and nobody will hear what they're saying. The point is to have students themselves identify why all this stuff exists, and why it's in school curriculums, and what they might be able to do with it, and out of that process reorient them.

Could there have been any other outcome except a magazine?

Sure. In fact, a magazine was only one of the things we did. Another one

of the votes the kids made was to create satirical television commercials, like take a Volkswagen ad and make a new one. I was taking kids all over the county filming commercials.

Radio shows, videos. . .?

We didn't do a video show the first few years, but we did not long afterward. Radio shows were another choice. And the kids put out a record album, too.

And some of the other projects in the networks, are they taking a shape other than magazine, videotape?

Oh, yes! One group of 6th graders made a child safety booklet. It's a perfect illustration of what I'm talking about—a one-time pamphlet by kids, for kids—their choice, their vote, their decisions. What the English teacher does is just keep riding herd on the structure, the management: what's going on in the classroom, how is it working, and on the skills.

When you say management, what you mean is keeping it actively going?

Right, and troubleshooting, and at appropriate moments calling the whole class back together and saying, "Something has happened here that I think you ought to take a look at." You turn to one of the kids and say, "Would you explain this?" And one student in that group will say, "We just tried this, it didn't work at all, and here's what happened." And the class tells them possible solutions. Or students go out on an interview, and they come back, and we talk about what happened.

In this process students can't hide their intelligence. You treat them as if they're intelligent.

Yes. Well, they are. They just may not be very experienced.

But you really expect more use of their intelligence?

Because I know it's possible for kids to do more. That's the one big com-

Anne Meek

You were telling me what you were doing last summer...

Robbie: We're the 25th anniversary book crew. So far we went through the process of getting ideas, deciding what the chapters are, and just collecting information. So after we collect the information, next year in school, we'll have a special 25th anniversary book class, and it'll be dedicated to finishing and putting the book out. And what have you been doing on the "book crew"?

Scott: We've been doing interviews, transcribing, and photographing. We've been interviewing former students. Last year I was in Foxfire 1. Foxfire 1 gets you ready for Foxfire 2. It shows you how to use cameras, tape recorders, the darkroom, and things like that. And then when you get into Foxfire 2, you put out the magazine.

Robbie: I feel like I'm part of a milestone, we're sort of like the steppingstone to 25 more years. I feel real good about it because, you know, this book's going to get us into college.

So how are you going to draw on that experience in college?

Keri: Once we get there, we're going to be more ready from Wig's way of teaching us, more ready to write papers and compositions. By giving speeches, we're going to know how to stand up and give speeches to our college professors. It's going to help our confidence because we've already made speeches to lots of groups.

Robbie: We've learned, too, because we go out and interview these other people. At least we are helping them and the way they live. We're preserving what their experiences have been.

Keri: It makes you feel good because it means a lot to these older people, too. A lot of students interviewed their grandparents. You know, they want to keep their grandparents alive even though they may die literally. It's a way to keep them around and to keep what they say around. If my grandparents died, I'd still have them, sort of, or I'd have a piece of them in what they say.

Robbie: I think Foxfire sort of makes you more mature, you know. I still act like a kid, but when you do this, it's making you into a young adult, sort of. Like when you go to college, you're going to be sort of professional, because you've been doing a book and because—I've learned more in the last two years than I've learned in 10 years of school.

Scott: In your regular English classes, you learn what's in the book and that's it. We go beyond that.

What you're doing doesn't show up on a test, does it?

Leigh Ann: The magazine is actually the test. It's not a test per se. But that's our test.

Robbie: I look at the whole year as a test and the magazine is like...

Leigh Ann: A whole year of learning.

How does your research for the magazine or the book lead you to other books?

Keri: Last week I went to see a play called "The Reach of Song." It's about this man Byron Herbert Reese. He wrote three or four books of poetry, and he was a teacher at Young Harris College, and he killed himself. Mama drove me off to the play, and I thought, "I really don't want to see this," but when I got there, it so much related to Foxfire that it was just unbelievable to me, and I just really got into the play. Because I did take Foxfire, it made me think about a lot of things that they were saying.

Robbie: I just took out Wig's *Sometimes A Shining Moment* and, I took it home, and I read it. And, after reading that book, I mean, Wig, I know he's a teacher, but he's sort of like a kid.

Leigh Ann: He's a friend. Well, he's demanding, he intimidates you because you know he's so smart, but then in a way it doesn't matter because he's so nice.

Scott: That's good, that's pretty good.

Robbie: When I graduate, I just want to look back at my high school years and look at them as joyful, but I don't know if I would have without Foxfire, I've got to go on now, how he taught me, and see if I've done my part.

Keri Gragg is a senior, **Robbie Bailey** is a junior, and **Scott Cannon** and **Leigh Ann Smith** are sophomores, all at Rabun County High School, Tiger, Georgia. **Anne Meek** is Managing Editor, *Educational Leadership*.

plaint I have about whole-language instruction right now at this stage of its evolution. Those teachers are engaging in all these high-powered techniques, and the end result is what, in some cases, are trivial end products.

Such as?

Such as another version of a school literary magazine that looks just like

the ones they've done before. Such as a whole series of little booklets that are bound, each with its own cover, and put on the shelf in the classroom library for the other kids to read. I'm not saying that it's bad—it's *not* bad—but if you arrange things along a scale of involvement and sophistication, and of substance, they would be at the low end of the scale.

The child safety booklet is an example of something that's probably halfway up the scale. And students creating a book that's going to be published by Doubleday—that two million people are going to read—those students, as 9th and 10th graders, taking that manuscript up to New York and delivering it to Doubleday in person and sitting down with the art department about the design—that's pretty far up the scale.

I don't know how much farther up it goes. I'm sure it does; it's just that I haven't been able to take it past that. Yet.

But what about very young students?

Two summers ago I did a workshop in Seattle where I helped teachers understand this process so they could do projects with their students. That would give me five project illustrations on site, by Seattle teachers, for the course I taught at the University of Washington last summer. During that course, which Ann Lieberman set up, one of the teachers brought two of her kindergarten students, and they stood up and talked to the group about what they had done that year. Then they showed the 10-minute videotape they had made—which was shown all over Puget Sound that summer to upcoming kindergarten kids to alleviate their fears about what was going to happen to them in school.

These kids wrote six books. They'd picked the themes—all the fears they had when they first came to school. They circled the themes they wanted to explore: school bus, recess, lunch, like that. Each of the kids would tell the teacher one of her fears, and she'd write it on the board. She'd say "Is this right? Is this the one?" And then she would transfer that statement to a big sheet of poster paper, and the kid who contributed it would illustrate that page.

Then they moved from the creation of those books, each with its own theme, into a situation where each kid reads his or her line on camera. First you see the kid, and then you see that situation re-enacted. Then back to a different kid, and the kid reads, and

then you see his re-enactment—back and forth between them. And, in our course, the little girl, Stacy, stood up and read the whole book about school buses while we listened. Then we saw the videotape.

I would put that project up the scale from two sentences created on a "Writing to Read" program, for example. It's real work for a real purpose, for a real audience, for a real world. And kindergartners can do it. They just don't get many chances.

Do you involve administrators in these courses you teach?

Yes, we hold a session for the principals and instructional leaders of the teachers in the course, and the agenda is *not* confrontation. The vast majority of these teachers have never really sat down and talked to their principals about anything other than their own personal evaluations, never really talked about instruction and what we stand for and the mission and goals.

They're convinced that—it's another one of the "Yes, but's"—if they try something, the principals are going to tell them it's not going to work, it's going to be too expensive, someone's going to get hurt, and so on.

The principals don't admit that, though, right?

The teachers are convinced that's what's going to happen. So the purpose of this meeting is to say, "We're not going to have a confrontation here, folks; what we want is to learn how to work with our principals when we want to get permission and enthusiasm for something we want to try with our kids.

And the principals will say, "Fine, let us help you understand what it's like from our side of the desks. We want to make sure you've thought it through so that the instructional objectives will, in fact, be met. We want to make sure your evaluation strategies are going to reveal your progress. And it would help if you could bring us something in writing two or three days before, and then we'd set up a meeting together and just talk it through. And give me an opportunity to question the thinking behind it a little bit in the

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same way you question your own kids."

For some reason or another, there's this level of paranoia between the two groups in some schools. But the principals will say, "Look at what we gain: we gain parental enthusiasm because the parents are excited about what the kids are doing. The kids are coming home every day, talking about what's going on in *your* class." Or they say, "The newspapers are going to cover the students' projects. It's going to be just as good for me—for my reputation, on my resume—as it's going to be for you." Or "What's the problem? You're responsible teachers. You're not going to jump off the edge of a cliff and have everything crash in around you. You're going to take it one step at a time."

Teachers just breathe a sigh of relief and respond, "I had no idea that we could even talk like this, that we could even have this conversation."

How else are administrators serving to move us toward this kind of collaboration?

One of the most promising signs is the principal center idea that Roland Barth started at Harvard. The more principals go through the process that teachers take their kids through, the more able they're going to be the kinds of instructional leaders they really ought to be.

We've somehow got to figure out how to get all that paper off those principals' desks. We cannot expect that kind of leadership from people who are bedeviled and distracted. If a principal isn't of a mind to do that and would rather have all the paper, then we'd better have somebody in our schools who constantly puts teachers in situations where they analyze what's happening on a day to day basis.

We'd better learn from what we're doing?

It's one of the biggest dilemmas we face in this profession—and what's got to be the ultimate irony of all times: education itself, as a profession, doesn't have any collective memory. Education ought to be the profession that builds on its own past experiences and incorporates all that into the work at hand. Education ought to be thoughtful, but it's not.

People are making all this noise, for example, about the writing process, this new contribution we're making to the field, this breakthrough. But I have a book written by John Dewey in 1917 that outlines all the writing process methodology: cooperative and collaborative writing strategies as part of a community of learners.

So developing a collective memory is basic on your agenda?

It's either that or consign ourselves to continuing to make the same mistakes over and over again and hurting kids in the process, turning kids off and having them, by the time they're in the 9th grade, so sick of school they can hardly wait to leave. That's absurd. That's not the legacy we want to leave behind. □

Author's note: For more information about Foxfire's work with teachers, contact Hilton Smith, Foxfire, Rabun Gap, GA 30568. See also *Sometimes A Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience*, New York: Doubleday, 1985.

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