



From the late '60s, during the early days of *Foxfire*: Pearl Martin, the grandmother of a student, demonstrates how to make lye soap.

Culture Begins at Home

“Elegant compromises” in the classroom can make the dichotomous discussions between traditionalists and multiculturalists irrelevant. Foxfire’s 25-year history proves that not only is there room in the curriculum for the study of cultures, but that the lessons last a lifetime.

ELIOT WIGGINTON

The main thing you learn in these interviews is that there was a different life before our generation. A more self-sufficient life. Also that there is a lot to learn from our ancestors — our grandparents — and that they’re really smarter and have a lot more knowledge than we thought. That is not captured without these interviews. . . . There’s so much of heritage that is lost because things are not written down and saved. I guess every Foxfire student will tell you the same thing.

—Vaughn Rogers
Foxfire: 25 Years, p. 73

For a quarter century now, public high school students in at least three of my English classes every year have met their language arts requirements by studying their Appalachian mountain history, customs, and traditions.¹ They read books by Appalachian authors — Thomas Wolfe, James Agee, Wilma Dykeman, Jesse Stuart, Harriet Arnow, James Still — and are routinely amazed to discover that the region produced any authors at all. They also produce a quarterly magazine, *Foxfire*, whose contents are drawn from the extensive interviews they conduct with community elders. And they write

books about their heritage. To date, Doubleday has published 12 of these, and E. P. Dutton, 4, with total sales approaching 8 million copies.

All this is fact. Also fact is the nearly universal conviction among former students and their families that the work they did in the Foxfire project was abundantly worth doing. For *Foxfire: 25 Years*, 10th and 11th graders interviewed numerous former students to find out what impact, if any, their experience with Foxfire has had on their lives (Wigginton 1991). On one point there was unanimous agreement: through the program, they had confronted the national stereotype of the ignorant, shiftless Appalachian mountain hick, put it behind them, and entered into a new, unshakably proud relationship with their heritage.

And for 20 years, similar data have been flowing in, filling filing cabinets in our offices, from hundreds of similar projects based in nearly every conceivable school and community environment, from the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Bribri Indian classrooms in the Talamanca region of Costa Rica. That, too, is fact.

Inevitably, such work generates surprises, ironies, paradoxes, new convictions: *insights*. It is to those, at this point in my career, that I am most drawn. I’ll share some of them here.

The Need to Know Our Culture

The fact that students are *of* a culture does not automatically mean that they will know very much about that culture or have more than superficial notions about its history or its worth. My native-born high school students

routinely do not know that they are Appalachian — or even where the region is. How all that came to pass is grist for another article, but I find this condition shameful. More about this point later.

Only Sustained Exposure Is Effective

When students are *told* by a teacher or a text that they should be proud of their culture, the impact is negligible. A guest speaker at an assembly doesn't remedy the situation nor do ethnic foods festivals or once-a-week "enlightenment" sessions. Rather, it is sustained exposure that is effective in an environment characterized by independent student research and inquiry, where aspects of culture are discovered (as in a scavenger hunt) and brought, as Maxine Greene would say, "to a level of consciousness" and examined.

Students in my introductory class spend a full school year of 55-minute periods immersed in Appalachian material, and that is barely enough. Given the continual interruptions, 180 state-mandated meetings over the course of a year usually translates into the equivalent of 17 eight-hour days. Not much.

Even so, when doctoral student John Puckett spent a year evaluating the *Foxfire* program and interviewing scores of former students selected at random, he heard the results of that sustained exposure loud and clear.² From one student:

I never really knew what my heritage was until I got in *Foxfire*. Seems like I had a lot more in common with these old people than I had thought. It was like you've got a thumb here, but you've never paid any attention to it. It was like something that's been there, but I never realized it was a part of me.

—Myra Queen Jones
Foxfire Reconsidered, p. 90

Culturally Appropriate Texts

The fact that time is so precious has led many educators to conclude that there simply is not enough room in the curriculum for subjects with a cultural focus. This belief has sometimes led to contrived half-remedies from well-meaning teachers: word problems with an Appalachian slant in a math class ("If three dogs tree a mother bear and two cubs . . .") or American history taught through a text revised to acknowledge a contribution or two from each of several ethnic groups.

Viewed from another angle, however, lack of time can impel us to make other kinds of compromises, which in retrospect turn out to be nearly elegant. The wedding of a language arts class and the examination of culture is one good example of such an "elegant compromise." In Georgia, the "mastery" of 92 Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) skills requirements in language arts, grades 9-12, is evaluated through a statewide testing program. Through constant trial and error, I've found that I can target, directly and effectively, every one of those requirements — be it in reading, research, writing, grammar, mechanics, even origins of the English language — through our study of the Appalachian region. Using a whole language approach, I can hit every one, hard, and prove it. And, often for the first time, largely because of the project and content focus, the kids begin to *like* — imagine that — English.

The experience of elementary teachers adds another dimension—and a degree of urgency and "fit" — to this point. Take Linda Oxendine, who teaches 2nd graders in the Appalachian coal field town of Barbourville, Kentucky. The district-mandated basal reader is full of alien elements that her kids can't relate to: brick homes, lawns and lawn sprinklers, and dogs

that are allowed to come inside the house. Second grade, and they're starting to hate school.

As a compromise, Linda and her students attend to the basal on Mondays, but the rest of the week, in a whole language environment, they create their own text. And each year it is a wonder—published, bound, filled with personal experience narratives that are culturally based. They write about church singings, weekend rides with their fathers in coal trucks, hunting and fishing trips. The kids also create radio shows. Once a week, to an appreciative local audience, they read letters from their listeners and works in progress. And every year, the kids' scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills place them at or above grade level in reading and writing. Attention to culture, then, is not just an end in itself through a special class, but also a powerful catalyst to develop literacy. Double duty. (We teachers get good at this as we confront the realities of the clock.)

But here's an even bigger point: Linda's earlier problem with the basal would not be solved by a new reader filled with more culturally appropriate material produced by a text manufacturer. If such a reader existed, and Linda and her students used it, the world would go backwards. The kids' gains are the result of *creating* culturally appropriate texts. To replace that activity with a new, "better" reader would destroy all, for she now has one of those "elegant compromises" to which I referred earlier — a remarkable arrangement born of adversity, locally solved.

Similarly, I want no Appalachian text for my high schoolers. Each year, the kids create their own in the form of new *Foxfire* magazines and books. And that's the whole point. Text manufacturers, in other words, would

only slow our progress and co-opt the potential of this opportunity. What we must be ever mindful of as teachers is that it is the act of creating a tangible product of substance, through *using* the skills to be learned, that students approach understanding and mastery. The personal investigation of culture — in part because it is something the kids can access so immediately and resonate



From the late '70s: Ray Ward shows Foxfire students how to operate the water-powered sawmill his father, Ben, invented.

to so deeply — can cause them to invest that budding tangible product with a sense of such importance that the classroom is lifted out of routine into another dimension.

Teachers and Students, Meeting in the Middle

The popular notion that a teacher must be from the same culture as his or her students in order to successfully navigate within and appreciate that culture is, to put it baldly, wrong. I am not from the part of the country where I have spent my whole career. I was not even trained in advance — “sensitized” — to work with rural Appalachian black and white kids. I just appeared in 1966 and started to teach. The 9th and 10th graders voted to start a magazine. They decided on its cultural focus; I followed their lead.

They taught me how to work with them (“Let’s *do* something real instead of sitting here!”); I taught them how to put the results of their research into publishable form. We met in the middle.

This year, *Minds Stayed On Freedom*, a fine oral history documenting the participation of Holmes County, Mississippi, adults in the civil

rights movement, was published by Westview Press. The material was collected, compiled, and edited by local African-American teenagers as part of their Bloodlines project. The teacher who guided them through the process was a Harvard-educated northeastern

Yankee white named Jay MacLeod. The Bribri Indian kids who wrote *Nuestra Talamanca Ayer y Hoy* were coached by Paula Palmer, who I know for a fact is not a Bribri Indian.

What is at issue here, in other words, is far more a style of working with people than a matter of ethnic background.

Preparation for the Larger World

Another popular notion — the fear that attention to and celebration of culture may make the students more provincial, insulated, defensive, antagonistic, hostile, even revolutionary — may have some basis worth considering. Try as I might, however, I cannot find a shred of evidence to support that concern either among my former students, nor those who’ve worked on similar projects. (Friends, in fact, have

told me that they wish there were more stirring among Foxfire students — tangible movement toward a Hillbilly revolution to reassert a cultural supremacy in the mountains.) It’s not there. Rather, the prevailing pattern is that students appreciate their own culture, acknowledge its contributions, and move into the larger world to become reasonably responsible citizens: small business owners, teachers, journalists, builders, airline pilots. You know, *people*.

Apart from numerous other parental, societal, and environmental factors at work in these kids’ lives, one reason for this positive outcome is that my colleagues in the Foxfire program and I search constantly for ways to put our students into direct working relationships with students from other cultures. We then help them process those experiences to gain insights.

Hundreds of our students, to give one example, have worked outside the mountains with other students and teachers to help start similar projects. Most recently, four just returned from Australia. I think particularly of Ronnie Welch, now foreman in a shop that repairs railroad cranes, who, as a 10th grader, accompanied me to the tiny fishing village of Togiak, Alaska. In *Foxfire: 25 Years*, he recalls:

I learned a lot about Alaska and Alaskan people. Like some of the traditions that we have here, like making liquor, and rooster fighting, making quilts, making soap. . . . Up there they have the same thing, except different than we do. I mean . . . they fix fish completely different than we do. It’s the same thing, except a different perspective of it all.

It took some time to help the students understand how to go about getting a *Foxfire* started, and this one wasn’t planned or nothing — three of the kids that was there was still really interested with what went



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Eliot Wigginton talks to Benham Elementary students about producing a magazine about their peer tutoring project.

on during the day, and we went out and talked to their daddy that evening. And he just naturally got off on stories because I wasn't familiar with it up there. . . . He showed me a different way to smoke salmon than the other people did, you know, and just things like that.

And it hit me all of a sudden. . . . They was looking at *Foxfire* . . . as being in a classroom, and they still wasn't getting the point. . . . But that right there let them know what it was all about . . . from that point . . . it was all natural . . . and I feel like we got accomplished what we were after. And now I have something I've done, something I'll always remember (pp. 232-233).

It's important to note at this point, in a time when so many classroom environments are multicultural, that not all of the students in *Foxfire* classes are, or have been, Appalachian. Some are sons and daughters of plant managers, for example, brought in from other areas to run the local rug mill. Sometimes the memories those students have of working with local elders are even more vivid than those of the local students. Their direct, positive immer-

sion into a culture so different from their own is always a revelation and sometimes a life-changing experience.

I remember Gary Warfield, sent to Philadelphia, Mississippi, to spend a summer with Choctaw Indian students who were starting a magazine. One Saturday night, he went to town with his new friends to see a movie. At that time, Indians were required to use a separate entrance into the theater and to sit in the balcony. The theater owner, realizing instantly that Gary, as blond as a Norseman, was not Indian, tried to make him sit downstairs with the whites. But Gary stayed with his Indian friends, and up until his recent death in a tractor accident, he refused to tolerate racism or notions of cultural superiority.

Or take Bob Kugel, a wild, rebellious kid from Detroit whose connection with Aunt Arie (the elderly mountain woman played by Jessica Tandy in "*Foxfire*," the Broadway play and Hallmark television special) broadened his perspective of the world. Now a New York City cab driver, he says, in *Foxfire: 25 Years*:

You can teach these kids about their community and about the outside world. *Foxfire* interviewed local people. There's local people everywhere. There's local people in Rabun County, and local people in New York City. There are people that stay in their own little world. . . . They think, "I'm a New Yorker. This is where it's at. Ain't nothing out there." Which is a crock of bullshit! That's America out there. So what *Foxfire* has done is open my eyes up to see the whole world. It helped me respect my fellow man (p. 299).

Not All Traditions Worth Celebrating

Inevitably, as teachers and students examine traditions, they will uncover

some that are not worth celebrating — some, in fact, that cannot be tolerated in this world. For example, would anyone want a return to the traditional role of the Appalachian woman? To traditional plumbing, as in an outhouse perched directly over a sparkling mountain stream? To traditional farming, with its steady, inexorable environmental degradation? To traditional childbirthing customs, with an axe placed under the bed to cut the pain? To a traditional, fatalistic acceptance of all misfortune? To blood-feuds? To Klan rallies? What kinds of people are going to salute that flag?

As we bring aspects of culture to that level of consciousness of which I spoke earlier, this skull-jarring paradox must be examined as well: a traditional culture probably does not exist that could not stand a good house-cleaning. As David Whisnant eloquently said in a recent speech in Atlanta:



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At David School in David, Kentucky, a hands-on science curriculum grew out of students' desire to make their polluted school pond suitable for fishing.

We all know, of course, that there are overtly reprehensible traditions: of violence, oppression, racism, sexism, bigotry, jingoism, xenophobia, and the like. Part of what is so disturbing about David Duke, Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, and their like is that so much of what they are and do is profoundly traditional. . . . One might indeed argue that as a source of mischief and grief in the world at present, traditional values, beliefs, practices, and structures easily hold their own with corporate cynicism, ideological rigidity, and nationalistic fervor.

Some might say at this point, "Wait. Examining these kinds of things, that's not for me. Once it gets beyond red beans and rice, it's gone too far." I and many of my peers would argue, on the other hand, that this paradox presents us with an opportunity — another elegant compromise — that can be truly educational. We can gradually construct, *with* our students, a yardstick of ethical behavior against which we can measure those aspects of culture we are studying — treasuring, showcasing, celebrating, amplifying those that pass the test and discarding the rest. There is always much to honor and be proud of, as the more than 6,000 pages of printed material in the various *Foxfire* books confirm. And as we examine the outdated, and/or dishonorable, dysfunctional, and self-limiting, most of us will silently, simultaneously say to ourselves, "This practice or belief is one I will not carry forward with me into my life, or condone in others. We can do better than this."

A Yardstick of Ethical Behavior

That yardstick. Where does it come from? Well, for starters we can look to the basic documents upon which this country was founded. "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." As we

ask ourselves how we want to be treated by others, we can add home-grown convictions, such as: *We don't want to be made to feel stupid. We don't want to be lied to. We don't want our stuff to get stolen or messed with. We want to feel important, special.*

Added to and revised over the course of a year, the list can become pretty impressive — and persuasive. And if we turn the activity of looking for a yardstick of behavior a few degrees, and we begin to examine our guidelines for a decent society; and if we turn it a few degrees more, and we discuss what obstacles prevent us from achieving such a society; and if we turn it a bit further to intersect with our study of culture, and we examine practices that foster or discourage the kind of society we all want; and if we turn it a bit further to embrace a multicultural classroom, with lessons to be learned, positive and negative, from all cultures; and if we then connect all this to the study of American history, things begin to get interesting.

And if we determine from the start that our classroom will model the kinds of behaviors we have identified together for that yardstick, and we affirm that as we work together, we will refer to that yardstick constantly for guidance, things get even more interesting. We become, in other words, the society we envision for America: respectful and enthusiastic of the traditions of others that serve and advance the vision, and intolerant of those traditions that retard it.

In such a classroom, the endless, droning dichotomous discussion between those who advocate the study of culture and those who would protect the American values that originally brought various immigrant cultures to this new democratic experiment becomes pointless background noise. The elegant blend of both agendas in

the context of a democratic classroom is all.

Why We Must Study Culture

"But it can't happen." Yes, it can. It is. It's happening in lots of places. And I can prove it.

This brings me back to an earlier point, that not knowing about one's culture is shameful. It's shameful because ignorance of our culture leads us to be blind to some of the forces that control our behavior and attitudes. If we are not led to examine our culture and background, we are denied the potential such study has to influence the acquisition of certain academic skills and content, to evaluate our beliefs in comparison with those of others, to select the best against certain unassailable principles, and to change society.

It — the study of culture — is exactly that important. □

¹One of these courses is described in week-by-week detail in *Sometimes A Shining Moment* (Wigginton, 1985).

²John Puckett evaluated the *Foxfire* program for his Ph.D. dissertation in education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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