

Student Choice in the Classroom: An Interview About Foxfire With David Forker, Hilton Smith, and Sara Alice Tucker

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In 1966, Eliot Wigginton, a young teacher just out of college, was confronted with a class of grade 9 students who read at a grade 3 level and could not be motivated to improve their skills. After pulling out all the tricks he had learned in college, Wigginton finally threw up his arms in despair and simply asked his students what *they* thought would work. It was the spark that rekindled their interest. They swarmed out into the community, collected folklore and folk art, interviewed neighbours, photographed tools, made drawings of buildings, and published all of it in a magazine they called Foxfire. The project continued over the next years and a collection was published as a book in 1972—this first Foxfire book became a national bestseller. The Foxfire success story continued and in the late 1980s systematic research established the core practices that were the foundation of this successful pedagogy.¹

Foxfire is on the minds of many oral historians, who have commonly learned about it as the earliest and most successful example of the use of oral history in the classroom.² Indeed, oral history is a powerful teaching tool. Yet, the literature that introduces oral historians to Foxfire usually focuses on the oral history aspects or discusses Foxfire as a form of community history, leaving aside the theoretical underpinning of this creative, student-empowering pedagogy. From the view of Foxfire practitioners, oral history is *not* at the centre of Foxfire. It is but one of many tools. The power of Foxfire rather rests in the principle of *student choice*. Foxfire is what David Forker does in his middle-school classroom. When students first come into his classroom at the beginning of the school year, they do not find a neat row of desks and chairs. Rather, the desks and chairs are stacked up in a heap in one corner of the room. “You decide how you want to arrange them,” Forker tells his students. And so he continues throughout the year, asking students to make choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. This approach is not a free-for-all, however, because standards have to be met. The student choice is about the ways they want to take to learn what a national curriculum tells them they must learn. Oral history may be a way to learn about history, language, culture, nature, or society. But students may also choose

¹ Core practices are available online at <http://www.foxfire.org/teaching.html> (accessed 22 August 2011).

² Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 196-200.

other tools. There is much that oral historians can learn from the Foxfire approach for their practices both inside and outside of the classroom.

The *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* invited three Foxfire practitioners to talk about the ideas behind Foxfire and about their experiences as teachers in the classroom. Dr. Hilton Smith, Dr. Sara Alice Tucker, and Mr. David Forker were visiting Winnipeg to deliver the keynote address to the University of Winnipeg's Teaching History Summer Institute 2011, which focused on the theme of "Oral History, Story Telling, and Literacy."³ David Forker is the most recent "convert," having employed the "core



From left to right: David Forker, Hilton Smith, Sara Alice Tucker

practices" of Foxfire since participating in a weeklong workshop in the summer of 2010. Forker, who has a B.A. in Philosophy from High Point University and his M.A.T. in Secondary English Education from Piedmont College, teaches English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) at Coile Middle School in Athens, Georgia.

³ Further information about this and future summer institutes are available at <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/index/history-teacher-si-index> (accessed 22 August 2011).

Alexander Freund, "Student Choice in the Classroom: An Interview About Foxfire With David Forker, Hilton Smith, and Sara Alice Tucker," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 31 (2011).

Dr. Hilton Smith, on the other hand, is an education veteran, who has taught in high schools in and around Atlanta, Georgia, for several decades. He joined the Foxfire organization in 1985 and taught social studies classes at Rabun County High School to explore, as he said, “adapting Foxfire to academic subjects other than English and journalism.” Smith is currently chair of the Secondary Education Department at Piedmont College and coordinator of the Foxfire-Piedmont Partnership for Programs for Teachers. After helping with the editing of the Foxfire magazine and books, he became coordinator of the Foxfire teacher Outreach Program. Smith received his B.A. and M.Ed. at Emory University (Atlanta), and his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership at Georgia State University. Between bachelors and masters degrees, Dr. Smith served for three years as USAF intelligence officer.

Dr. Sara Alice Tucker began her teaching career in 1972, teaching in grades K, 2, 3, 4, 5 in Alabama, Virginia, Maryland, and Georgia. She received her bachelors and masters degrees in Early Childhood Education from Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama in 1972 and 1974 respectively, her Doctor of Education degree from Wilmington University in Wilmington, Delaware in 2000, and certification as a Critical Friends Facilitator through the National School Reform Faculty in 2006. She also received Literacy Collaborative instruction at Georgia State University. From 2002 to 2009, Dr. Tucker served as Literacy Coordinator at Baldwin Elementary School. Since 2009, she has been an Early Intervention Program Teacher for struggling fourth and fifth graders in reading and math (majority second language learners) at Baldwin Elementary School, a public K-5 grade school in Baldwin, Georgia. She is an adjunct graduate faculty member in the School of Education at Piedmont College, where she facilitates courses in the Foxfire program and Classroom Management.

In the interview, the three Foxfire practitioners describe the Foxfire approach to teaching and learning and tell many anecdotes and stories of teaching experiences in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education.

Cite the interview (Chicago style):

Alexander Freund and Nolan Reilly, “Interview with David Forker, Hilton Smith, and Sara Alice Tucker, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, 18 August 2011,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 31 (2011).

Cite this article (Chicago style):

Alexander Freund, “Student Choice in the Classroom: An Interview With David Forker, Hilton Smith, and Sara Alice Tucker About Foxfire,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 31 (2011), 1-2.