

Review:

Collaborative Imagination by Paul Feigenbaum

Mark Latta,
Marian University

During his keynote address at the inaugural Conference on Community Writing, Paul Feigenbaum discussed his origins as a “frustrated idealist” and wondered, “if it is possible to be a justice oriented scholar.” Many social justice scholars are likely revisiting the nature of “justice oriented” scholarship with a renewed sense of frustration and urgency in the current post-sense era of American politics. With *Collaborative Imagination*, Feigenbaum has provided more than a timely and meticulous study in activist rhetoric. He has advanced critical literacy theory in ways that are urgently necessary for the discipline to take up and apply.

At the center of *Collaborative Imagination* is the tension of “an ongoing struggle either to maintain or resist the societal status quo” (29) through individual or collective action and how these struggles are exacerbated by the strain between liberal and radical perspectives. Whether we attempt to maintain the status quo, alter it, or dismantle it, we are

all in some way contributing to a collective ideal of how “activism *was, is, and ought to be*” (29). The struggle is a rhetorical one, with an “adaptive rhetoric” (35) seeking to maintain the dominant hegemony and an “activist rhetoric” (36) seeking to disrupt it. However, maintaining an activist stance is not simply a matter of working against an adaptive rhetoric. Rather, activism must continually be “earned and re-earned” (3) by not only anticipating the “rhetorical decay” (147) brought about by the “adaptive function” (147) of the dominant narrative, but by also continually reinventing the activist stance while resisting the trappings of the liberal-progressive binary.

It is Feigenbaum’s refashioning of the liberal-progressive binary into a hybridized continuum that should be of the most interest for literacy scholars and activists. A lot of finite energy is spent on the debate between the utility of liberal pragmatism and the radical purity of critical theory. Strict adherence to either of these perspectives, according to Feigenbaum, helps feed the adaptive rhetoric of the status quo. Emphasis on the pragmatic liberal perspective too often fuels the “starfish savior narrative” (143) of meritocratic individualism that undermines the potential for collective social imagination of new possibilities (*starfish* refers to the allegory of the boy on the beach who rescues individual starfish while declaring, “it matters to that one”).

Similarly, demanding adherence to critical theory—what Feigenbaum calls the “progressive perfect standard” (111)—too often ignores the realities of local conditions and temporal constraints, favoring resistance for the sake of resistance while failing to identify potential justice oriented outcomes or the local epistemic wisdom needed to achieve them. Either outlook has the potential to undermine the literacy activism it hopes to foster and is therefore susceptible to assimilation or decay. Feigenbaum proposes a hybridized progressivism, one that continually reworks itself across a spectrum of liberal and radical thought in response to a triangulation of context, efficacy, and systemic reformation.

The book is organized along three parts with two chapters per part plus an epilogue. The first part provides the theoretical core and facilitates the bulk of Feigenbaum’s emerging framework regarding “earned activism” (3), the cyclical nature of “adaptive rhetoric” (7)

and “progressive sponsorship of literacy” (55). Here, Feigenbaum models his conceptualization of composition ecologies within his writing, meshing together theories and stances from many of the established literacy activist scholars while also thankfully drawing from other related disciplines. Part 1 provides a careful assemblage of theory to construct a new ecology of community literacy scholarship. While the first two chapters of the book might seem tightly wound at times, this is by necessity. The conceptual shift from solitary savior rhetoric to a collective progressive mentality will not come easily given how reified both have become.

The second part of the book provides historical context for situating the origins and incredible potential of communal activism. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Freedom Schools, Highlander Folk School and Sunflower County Freedom Project are provided as models of collaborative activism, each a progressive literacy sponsor that worked to invoke imagination of social possibility beyond the capabilities of any one person. Framed as “practical literacy networks” (77), Feigenbaum demonstrates an earlier central claim of *Collaborative Imagination* related to the adaptive rhetoric by demonstrating that, while these organizations were capable of producing meaningful change, they weren’t able to stave off “rhetorical decay” (7). Once each had “won” by moving the needle ever so slightly towards justice, the adaptive function of the mainstream resisted any additional gains as unnecessary. This decay is one of the hallmarks of adaptive rhetoric: the urgency of the message is positioned in a singular moment of time and framed around the savior narrative. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. are viewed as individual heroes, but little attention is afforded to the sustained collective efforts that created the movements and moments in which they emerged. The adaptive rhetoric would prefer this: *one* is an anomaly and easier to contain, but *everyone* is a movement and more difficult to subvert. Without a continued sense of urgency, what Feigenbaum coins as “(always) emergent sponsorship” (68), literacy sponsors are unable to prevent the rhetorical decay of the activist message or maintain a vision of the practical as it stretches into utopian possibilities.

To be clear, this is not a criticism of these progressive organizations. Rather, it is the evidence Feigenbaum provides of the conceptualization of adaptive rhetoric and “rigged citizenship” (3). Hegemonic institutions of inequality were threatened in fundamental ways during the Civil Rights Era. But, ultimately, they were able to evolve and remain intact by adopting some elements of meritocratic agency while deflecting communal reconfigurations of equality. In this sense, the *is*, *was*, and *ought to be* was watered down into a version more hospitable for power asymmetries to maintain themselves. It is within the end of the second part of the book, but primarily within the third section that Feigenbaum examines those who are currently engaged in earning and re-earning their activism by cultivating a collectivist vision while working to prevent rhetorical decay. Among the many examples of literacy sponsors actively engaged in the work of fostering critical understandings is Ken Watson, a Detroit Public School college counselor. Mr. Watson is highlighted as someone who works to reconfigure paths to power for his students while also resisting the narratives of the “starfish savior” (109) and “progressive perfect standard” (111).

What does this blended progressivism and earned activism look like? Feigenbaum clarifies it could take a number of forms depending on the unique contexts of each location and situation, but he does offer some fundamental qualities. Earned activism and progressive literacy sponsorship would be hybridized, meshing together the “utopian thinking and pragmatic action as well as . . . community and institution” (68). It would not be overly concerned with efficiency, preferring instead to encourage risk-taking and operating from a “listening stance” (65) so as to evoke a sense of community and avoid the silencing of perspectives. It would be mindful of institutional gravitas. Perhaps, most importantly, it would recognize there is no such thing as success. To be deemed successful by a dominant narrative is to be co-opted: “for this reason, progressive sponsorship must resist its own mainstreaming—which would signify the ascendance of its own adaptive function” (69). Given the constellation of possibilities, the form this blend might take is not as nearly as important as its function: supporting ecologies of local publics to imagine and enact activist responses.

Feigenbaum covers a lot of ground within *Collaborative Imagination*—all of it necessary. One could approach this work as a census of community literacy scholarship. Cushman, Flower, Grabill, Goldblatt, Heath, Mathieu, Parks, and many more are represented here. *Collaborative Imagination* is important for no other reason than in how it unifies the field of community literacy. But valuing Feigenbaum for this achievement alone would ignore his major accomplishment of providing a new framework for working towards social justice within literacy education.

Feigenbaum creates a bridge toward critical theory perspectives while also recognizing the pragmatic frustrations of the “progressive perfect standard.” His concept of hybridity affords movements across the practical and radical, the tactical and strategic, the local and the global, “reimagining community literacy as a mechanism of progressive literacy sponsorship” (177).

Mark Latta, M.A., is the Director of the Writing Center, Instructor of English, and Public Literacy Coordinator at Marian University in Indianapolis, IN. He also directs the Flanner Community Writing Center. His research and teaching interests focus primarily on the intersections of composition, critical public literacies, informal learning systems, critical service learning, and resistance narratives (particularly in how these narratives are embedded within localized geographies and sociolinguistic features).