

Paul Feigenbaum, **Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education**, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015, 248 pp., \$40.00 (paperback).

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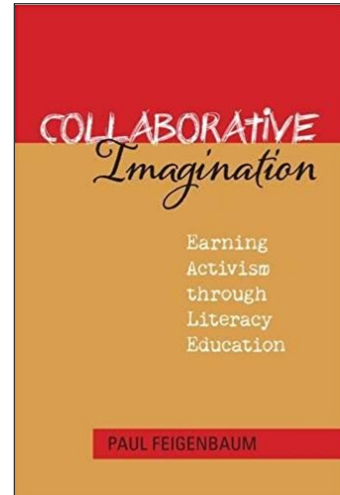
During the years that I worked for a nonprofit doing development work outside the United States, two narratives were frequently upheld: (1) education will provide people who are marginalized with the tools to improve their lives and (2) individuals can make a difference in the pursuit of social justice. While those ideas resonate with common U.S. ideologies about educational progress and individualism, the practical implementation involves several messy realities of how to achieve social change through education initiatives without colonialist overtones.

In the book ***Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education***, Paul Feigenbaum challenges the implications of understanding education as an equalizer and explores what it means for progressives to earn activism through literacy education. Feigenbaum addresses both broad, systematic concerns and analysis of localized activist projects, providing a rich discussion that delicately balances both theory and practice.

Feigenbaum begins by describing the metaphor of the “starfish savior,” a person who appears to be supporting a good cause by doing a small act of benevolence, but by doing so independently—without enlisting aid from others—the individual does not address the macro problem (p. 8). This sets a tone for the book by criticizing the notion that good citizens or activists work alone. Instead, Feigenbaum argues that activism is a collective endeavor that requires constant reimagination and adjustment.

To understand how to earn activism in community literacy and what good citizenship looks like, Feigenbaum uses the analytical tool of adaptive and activist rhetorics. He explains the distinction that “where adaptive rhetorics equate citizenship with personal responsibility and political quietism, activist rhetorics encourage hopeful, communalist action toward the creation of a more equitable world” (p. 17). This framework exemplifies the ongoing struggle over how to effect social change, as well as how we understand past activism.

Feigenbaum highlights Rosa Parks as an example of the narrative struggle over adaptive or activist history. Parks is often upheld as an independent hero whose single act of not giving up her seat for a white man on a bus changed the course of the civil rights movement; however, this diminishes her years of dedicated service before that moment and the long-term, communal work behind the movement. Feigenbaum argues that such narratives limit perceptions of past activism and narrowly define what constitutes appropriate civic behavior today. It also limits people’s imaginations of how they might contribute to future activism and their hopes for what justice looks like. The representative struggle over



present, past, and future representations of activism demonstrate how adaptive and activist rhetorics distinguish the world as it was, as it is, and as it ought to be.

A key strength of this approach is its attention to the discursive and communicative elements of activism. Feigenbaum notes "to begin destabilizing the adaptive function, progressives must first attend to how it operates discursively" (p. 35). Adaptive, or mainstream, discourses maintain the world as it already is, thus supporting the status quo. Activist, or imaginative, discourses justify or challenge the discursive "is" to envision the world as it ought to be.

Feigenbaum argues that sponsors, organizers, and researchers of community literacy have an ethical responsibility to understand how the discourses present in their teaching support or challenge students' imagination regarding social relationships and systems of oppression. He uses several practical examples to explain the ethical implications of adaptive or activist rhetorics within literacy education. Part 2 analyzes historical examples such as the Citizenship Schools and the Freedom Schools, both of which promoted literacy to combat rigged citizenship and nurtured collective rhetorical agency, then considers how modern progressives are attempting to carry on these traditions by relearning activism after rhetorical decay.

In Part 3, Feigenbaum embraces the "ought to be" by reimagining literacy education, using case studies of organizations such as New City Writing and Imagination Federation (IF) to illustrate how engaged scholars and community allies can earn activism through collaboration. I appreciate that he doesn't recommend any of these examples as prescriptive ways for doing community literacy; instead, he recognizes the importance of context in determining how one should engage with the unique problems within that place and time. Feigenbaum also critiques the "academic responsibility gap" in higher education, which reinforces traditional hierarchies of power, and he suggests that scholars must root themselves in local neighborhoods and communities in order to truly earn activism (p. 121).

What makes this book exemplary is that Feigenbaum offers solutions for his critiques and inspires hope that there is a better way to narrow the gap and promote social justice through equitable partnerships. The dialectic balance between hopeful imagination and practical reality is a difficult tightrope that engaged scholars, including myself, are constantly balancing. Knowing that social change takes years of arduous work and the support of multiple communities, then how can a single project make a difference? Is some amount of institutionalization beneficial for a social movement or nonprofit to gain resources and access? Can a community maintain its ethics of equality while also becoming formalized in its structure or processes? Feigenbaum answers these questions by suggesting that earning activism requires a hybridization of the ideal and the feasible, as well as a hybrid between community and institutions. The examples he discusses provide ideas for how others have approached these dynamics, and Feigenbaum carefully balances the hybrid tensions by encouraging scholars to be both practical and imaginative in activist pursuits.

Despite the strength of the examples, one weakness of the book is how it jumps through multiple theoretical ideas and key terms without fully developing each one. For example, although Feigenbaum mentions the problems associated with critical pedagogy as a reason to embrace the analytical tool of

adaptive and activist rhetorics, he doesn't address foundational scholars such as Freire (1972) and never discusses those problems in depth, creating a gap in the overall argument. As a communication scholar, I also would be interested in how Feigenbaum views his approach in relationship to communication activism for social justice research (Carragee & Frey, 2012; Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b) or communication activism pedagogy (Frey & Palmer, 2014). Feigenbaum briefly addresses the similarities between his approach and participatory action research (PAR) as a way to "directly confront the academic responsibility gap" (p. 134), but he doesn't distinguish how his approach differs or offers something new to PAR scholarship.

The book's examples also neglect consideration for how cultural practices and ideologies permeate adaptive and activist rhetorics. Feigenbaum doesn't directly define what "social justice" looks like or for whom it matters, nor does he explain who the "modern progressive" is that he is addressing. The meanings of social justice, activism, and progress are all dependent on cultural norms, thus, it would be interesting to consider how Feigenbaum's concept of earning activism could be applied in non-U.S. contexts. Feigenbaum does discuss the cross-cultural challenges that the IF network has had working in partnership with a community in Chacraseca, Nicaragua, which he is an active participant in, but he doesn't describe whether or how they define activism differently.

Academics studying community literacy or activism will find this book useful because it provides a thorough review of the challenges and benefits within those endeavors. In particular, the book can benefit scholars doing engaged scholarship, regardless of the area of study, because it discusses the challenges of negotiating community partnerships, balancing responsibility for joint projects with practitioners, and how scholars can pursue an activist hybridization of spaces in and around higher education. However, despite the focus on community partnerships, the book targets an academic audience familiar with rhetorical analysis and theory, which makes it less accessible for practitioners or those outside the academy.

Collaborative Imagination offers educators alternative mechanisms for earning and promoting activism through their teaching and research. Drawing on theory and practice, Feigenbaum advances scholarship on education, community literacy, and activism by envisioning how to navigate the many tensions within those endeavors. Most importantly, the book is a beneficial read for anyone engaged in social justice because it provides a timely dose of hope that change is possible through community engagement and imagination.

References

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