Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education

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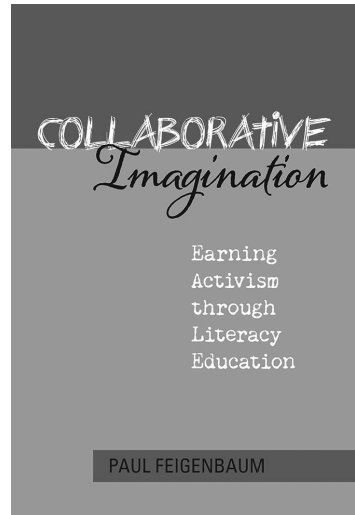*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, rshah@unl.edu

Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education

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The students in my spring 2017 graduate Literacy and Community Issues class developed a new term as part of our classroom vocabulary: starfishing. They coined this term in response to Paul Feigenbaum's *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism Through Literacy Education*, which makes a hopeful yet nuanced case for how networked efforts within institutions might create change. The book combines deep illustrations from the civil rights era with contemporary efforts in community literacy, layering perspectives as it moves forward and backward in time, to explore how different practices of literacy education shape notions of citizenship and how activists in literacy education go about pursuing social change. Laying out a parable to ground a key idea in his book, Feigenbaum retells the traditional story of the starfish savior: a man walking along a beach notices thousands of starfish washed up on the shore, and he sees another man throwing the starfish back into the sea, one by one. He tells the man throwing the starfish that this is a waste of time, as there are thousands of starfish—he cannot make a difference. The man throws another starfish into the sea and replies, "I made a difference to that one." This story is meant to be inspirational, but Feigenbaum, drawing on Buzz Alexander's Freirean interpretation of the parable, points out that this story is an individualistic myth that limits the potential for activism: rather than running into to town to gather others to help, or researching the cause for why the starfish are being washed up along the shore, the man exemplifies the idea that good citizens act alone. As Feigenbaum writes, "The starfish savior's willingness to sacrifice time and energy toward a good cause makes him appear to be morally righteous, but in failing to enlist aid in resolving the macroproblem, he ensures that the vast majority of starfish will perish" (9). Acting out of a starfish savior mentality—or, as my students termed it, starfishing—means blending romantic naïveté and individualism in ways that are ultimately ineffective in forwarding activism.

In contrast, Feigenbaum champions the concept of "collaborative imagination," "communalist hybridizations of utopian thinking and practical action" (5), which involves a group in collectively envisioning a society that offers first-class citizenship

to all and working together to move toward that vision *on the ground*. As Feigenbaum explains, activism must be earned—and activist rhetorics tend to "decay" into adaptive rhetorics, losing their ability to challenge the status quo, over time. Therefore, activism must be continually re-earned in literacy education.

This acknowledgement of both the potentials of activism and the very real forces that erode it allow Feigenbaum to offer a nuanced vision of community literacy, navigating between naïve hope and the despondency that often comes with critical awareness, between calls to tactically disassociate community literacy projects from institutions and service-learning's often-unexamined push toward greater institutionalization, between commitment to the ideals of critical pedagogy and recognition that the concepts of critical and false consciousness can counteract those ideals, between utopian dreaming about what community literacy should be and paralysis from the realization that this vision is unattainable. It is this nuanced approach that Feigenbaum takes throughout his book that equips community literacy practitioners with theoretical and practical agility to maneuver in fresh ways within constrictive systems and frameworks. Calling our attention to small but significant openings in theories and institutions that may seem ossified, *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism* is, frankly, energizing.

The introduction sketches out the key concepts and terms of the book in theoretical prose brought to life with narrative reflections from Feigenbaum's time in the Peace Corps, making this chapter especially useful for those wishing to understand or teach Feigenbaum's core ideas—it makes a great reading for a graduate or upper-division class on community literacy. Feigenbaum introduces his concepts through the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, describing how the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee challenged the system of "rigged citizenship" with collaborative imagination. In Feigenbaum's words, "[C]ollaborative imagination emerges from the premise that earning activism requires people to cultivate expansive and diversified capacities to imagine alternative worlds—more just, more tolerant, more compassionate, more sustainable—from that which exists in the present and then to employ mutually derived, rigorous methods for realizing these worlds" (6). Collaborative imagination resists "adaptive rhetorics," which forward the status quo.

It is here that Feigenbaum introduces the starfish parable as an example of adaptive rhetorics—a counter illustration of collaborative imagination—and he details the seductive nature of starfishing by describing the tension he felt while a teacher in Uzbekistan, attempting to work by himself to challenge an institutionalized grading system based on bribes. Feigenbaum unwittingly brought adaptive rhetorics with him from the US "like barnacles on an oil tanker," leading to an individualistic mindset that made it difficult to perceive other faculty as possible collaborators or imagine alternate responses (14). Feigenbaum makes his grappling with adaptive rhetorics visible to readers in a spirit of genuine reflection, acknowledging both the problematic pull toward adaptation and the very real complications of collaborative imagination. For example, Feigenbaum identifies his inability to partner with others as a "failure" (14), but also considers how collaborating with locals on political

action might expose them to brutal treatment by the Uzbek government, while his own risks would likely be limited to dismissal from the Peace Corps—and "where are the reciprocity and egalitarianism in that?" (15). He stresses the importance of recognizing how adaptive rhetorics work, but also warns that it is naïve to believe we can free ourselves from their influence. In his words, "We cannot defy mainstream cultural norms and expectations merely by naming their rhetorical practices; adaptation is not the rhetorical equivalent of Rumpelstiltskin" (15). A concept like collaborative imagination could all too easily slip into an idealistic truism, but through contextualized narrative that recognizes the embeddedness of literacy, here and throughout the book, Feigenbaum holds the tension and subtlety in the term.

Feigenbaum's book makes the case that shedding light on rhetorics of adaptation and working together to earn activism can, over time, expand people's notions of citizenship and equip them to counter the status quo. Accordingly, after the introduction, part one of the book unpacks the concepts of adaptive and activist rhetorics, and examines how these concepts can be used to forward collaborative imagination. Parts two and three illustrate these concepts through historical (chapter three) and contemporary (chapters four, five, and six) examples of how activist groups have used collaborative imagination to effect change.

More specifically, in part one, the first chapter looks at how adaptive and activist rhetorics are enmeshed in how citizenship is defined as personal responsibility or communalist action. Feigenbaum argues here that critical pedagogy's dichotomy of false consciousness and critical consciousness encourages disrespectful views of potential collaborators and fails to acknowledge the continual work involved in resisting adaptive rhetorics. This chapter explains how framing critical consciousness as a transformative, one-way experience leads to a debilitating "perfect standard." Drawing on Paul Loeb, Feigenbaum unpacks how viewing critical consciousness as permanent enlightenment means that personal flaws or moments of adaptive thinking discredit the whole effort of social change. Apolitical people can critique the small failures or inconsistencies of those who are attempting activism as a way to rationalize their own lack of engagement, and students can avoid humble attempts at making change because they cannot live up to this perfect standard. Ultimately, the perfect standard feeds cynicism.

Feigenbaum's clear identification of how the perfect standard functions rhetorically is especially important for the field of community engagement at this moment. Critiques of the movement are building, such as Randy Stoecker's recent book *Liberating Service Learning*, which calls for a complete halt to virtually all forms of community engagement with the rare exception of partnerships that are driven by community organizing. Stoecker lays out an important progressive analysis of service-learning for the ways it fails community members and reinforces the status quo, and I consider his book essential reading for those involved in engagement efforts. Yet, read in light of *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism*, I also see how Stoecker's book functions to support a perfect standard. In forcefully calling community engagement practitioners to give up unless we can perform a narrow form of collaboration, Stoecker's vision may stifle more humble, fledgling, or creative

efforts. Though Feigenbaum's work precedes Stoecker's, the immediate applicability of concepts like the perfect standard demonstrates how *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism* can help engaged scholars keep moving when confronted with less nuanced claims and theories.

Chapter two "uncloaks" (55) how adaptive rhetorics are invoked in formal education, specifically in how literacy is defined as a neutral tool that autonomously provides class mobility—and therefore justifies poverty in those who are framed as failing to take advantage of literacy. Then, the chapter lays out a vision for promoting collaborative imagination in literacy education. Particularly interesting here is how Feigenbaum extends Louise Wetherbee Phelps' theory of institutional invention to apply it to progressive literacy sponsorship, exploring how institutions that may seem rigid can be reimagined through communal, ethical innovation.

After outlining his theories, Feigenbaum moves in parts two and three to specific examples of these theories, drawing especially on the tradition of African American literacy instruction and activism, including Freedom Schools and Citizenship Schools as well as more contemporary examples of community literacy, such New City Writing in Philadelphia and Imagination Federation in Miami and Nicaragua. Chapter four may resonate particularly well with community literacy practitioners, as it follows the efforts of a fiercely dedicated high school guidance counselor, Ken Watson, to work within a flawed institutional system. Feigenbaum treats Watson's case thoughtfully, honoring Watson's legacy while also acknowledging the ways that the work of individual activists can be claimed in adaptive ways and systemic factors can hinder efforts at collaborative imagination.

Part three looks specifically at higher education and seeks ways that community literacy can challenge what Feigenbaum terms "the academic responsibility gap," the divide between the university's own interests and the interests of surrounding communities. As part of this discussion, Feigenbaum enters the debate about tactics and strategies, as community literacy scholars have disagreed about whether to embed community literacy efforts in institutions through "strategies" to encourage more institutional accountability, or to pursue "tactics" of short-term, uninstitutionalized initiatives in hopes that this path might allow responsiveness to community interests (Mathieu; Restiano and Cella; Parks). With characteristic nuance, Feigenbaum rejects the dichotomy of tactics and strategies, arguing that tactics always occur within the influence of strategic institutions, and institutions can be tactically manipulated: "For, just as there are no 'pure' communities untainted by institutional imperatives, there are no absolutely institutionalized structures utterly immune to reform" (129). He calls us to pursue progressive literacy sponsorship in a variety of formats and to work to make institutions more ethical through pathways like participatory action research. At the end of part three, Feigenbaum uses the epilogue to describe how he seeks to use his Community Writing class and a student club to nurture activist imaginations in students, and he calls community literacy scholars and teachers to seek creative ways to confront adaptation.

Feigenbaum's book came at the right time for my graduate class. All students were working at a community literacy site as part of the course, hosting writing

classes in detention centers, working with refugees on language acquisition, coaching slam poetry teams, and launching community writing centers. Unbridled enthusiasm for engagement work had been tempered by course readings that interrogated power dynamics and problematized literacy, and some students were starting to experience troubling policies and ideologies at their sites. I sensed genuine distress simmering in the room. The week before I assigned Feigenbaum, I asked students for "burning questions" they had about community literacy work. Their responses were telling— and they echo questions churning across the field of community literacy: "How do we partner with institutions when we disagree with the literacy they promote?" "Are Freire's tactics practical or even possible in a strategic institutional setting?" "If a program/partnership arises out of a tactical need, but the institution has no vision for it, can it become sustainably strategic?" "How do we work for reciprocity and a balance of power when we work within institutions that seem unchangeable?" "How is language tied to identity?" "Are we causing harm?" And, perhaps my favorite: "What are we doing???"

The following week's discussion of *Collaborative Imagination* brought a renewed sense of energy, as students began to consider alternate ways of approaching theories and institutions. One of my favorite insights came from a student working at a youth detention center facilitating writing workshops. She had been frustrated with many of the full-time teachers at the center, and she felt the institution was impermeable. In response to *Collaborative Imagination*, she reflected about how she had never considered *collaborating* with the teachers, as she had seen her work centered on her individual relationships with the adjudicated youth. This idea was a significant "aha" for her, as she explored what collaborative imagination could mean.

As community literacy practitioners are inundated by perfect standards, adaptive rhetorics, and mounting questions about the nature and purpose of our work, *Collaborative Imagination* offers a reflective examination of the forces that enable and decay activism, while encouraging literacy activists to find alternative ways forward—not through the promise of quick fixes, but through the challenge of the hard work of (re)earned activism. Elsewhere, Feigenbaum echoes Bob Moses in calling for activists to carve out "crawl spaces," spaces within an institution that also allow work beyond its limitations (Feigenbaum, Douglas, and Lovett). In many ways, *Collaborative Imagination* functions to call our attention to the potential crawl spaces in institutions, theories, and worldviews.

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