“Education is suffering from narration sickness,” declared Paulo Freire (1970/2000, p.71), questioning the attitudes and practices prevalent in mainstream schooling during a time when literacy in Brazil was a requirement for voting in presidential elections. Freire’s liberating notion of education still resonates today among justice-oriented educators who recognize that dominant voices of society dictate standardized curricular parameters that support a hierarchy of subjects, do not honor a diversity of talents, and perpetuate a single narrative of achievement and success. Too often, this imposed curricular recipe deprives students of their ability to think creatively, to pose inquiring questions, and to cultivate their intellectual potential with courage and ingenuity. Schools do not motivate learners to grow into creativity; instead they educate learners out of it (Robinson, 2006), and can also act as mechanisms to validate class structures and reproduce class positions. Mainstream educational discourse emphasizes an achievement ideology (MacLeod, 2008) that deems divergent outcomes of literacy education as a natural and necessary result of meritocracy, and it is unconcerned with the social reality of low-income learners who “no matter how diligently they devote themselves to schools, they cannot escape the constraints of social class” (MacLeod, p. 150). Students from economically challenged families are characterized as deficient and inferior by the dominant culture of the school, although the truth is that they are not marginal learners. Schools need to meet students where they are, and the approach to support their academic success is not to integrate them into the prevailing standardized structure but to transform that structure so they become “beings for themselves” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 74). As educators, we ought to respect the unique identity of each and every learner, to reevaluate our own cultural backgrounds, and to learn openly from those with different social class, immigration, and racial histories (Heath, 2010).

Paul Feigenbaum’s enlightening new book, Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education, calls into question the legitimacy of mainstream literacy education practices that nurture conformism with the status quo and perpetuate the class divide. He understands that alternative literacy education has the potential to foster a more just world, and believes in imagination and collaboration as strategies to combat the ubiquitous discourse that rarely reveals how formal schooling reinforces stratified educational access and supports the American system of rigged citizenship.

Feigenbaum challenges “common beliefs – especially among contemporary progressives – that formal institutions in civil society are too ossified to be changed for the better” (p. 4), and encourages faculty in higher education to reimagine institutions, destabilize the status quo, and “earn activism” through their teaching and scholarship. He buttresses his position with well-established theories of engaged learning and community-based research (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009; Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, Mackeigan, & Farrar, 2011; Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2011; Vernon & Ward, 1999) that manifest the value of university and community members working collectively and creatively toward the betterment of society, crafting a shared vision for change that ensures reciprocity in the partnership, and encompasses equal contributions and responsibility. In this sense, he echoes the views captured by action researchers in their analyses, case studies, and assessments of campus-community partnerships (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2002; Sandy & Holland, 2006) as well as the perspectives of international scholars researching civic engagement in higher education (Munck, McIlrath, Hall, & Tandon, 2014; Zuber-
Alonso García

Skerritt, Wood, & Louw, 2015). Feingenbaum’s vision of literacy for social change is aligned with the widespread understanding among service-learning practitioners that transformational learning results from crossing academic and community cultures, negotiating power dynamics in the partnership, committing to support the continuity of the relationships established with community partners, and constantly reassessing the needs and expectations of diverse constituencies.

Feingenbaum’s originality when envisioning campus-community partnerships resides in coining the term collaborative imagination to describe a model of literacy education that capitalizes on the diverse perspectives and capacities of people to imagine alternative worlds and to generate creative solutions and actions that involve mutual risk-taking. To destabilize the adaptive function of mainstream education, the author argues that progressive scholars need to engage communities in visualizing systemic change and enact a rhetoric of social action, i.e., a participatory dialogue that allows marginal groups to imagine a path of “hybridizing the ideal and the feasible” (p. 43). Feingenbaum invokes a collaborative imagination to confront mainstream structures of schooling that alienate those learners who do not measure up to the story of success crafted by the white elite.

The author’s idea of earning activism through literacy education suggests deconstructing the narrative of underachievement of minority learners propagated by dominant voices on the basis of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors that hinder students’ academic success, social mobility, and integration. His views are deeply influenced by justice-oriented educators (Brandt, 2011; Prendergast, 2010; Singer, 2014) who believe that formal education perpetuates the disenfranchisement of low-income and minority groups by tracking and ability-grouping students based on their academic performance and test results, thereby creating second-class citizens faced with daunting opportunities for future employment, unfair representation in and access to politics, and often caught in the school-to-prison pipeline. Feingenbaum recognizes that justice-oriented educators have the responsibility to pursue alternative praxes to undermine the ideology of literacy that supports the belief that literacy belongs to whites and confers on them proprietary rights over education.

Adaptive Rhetorics vs. Activist Rhetorics

In the first part of the book, the author proposes an innovative framework for analysis based on the notions of adaptive rhetorics vs. activist rhetorics. He associates adaptive rhetorics to the mainstream discourse in literacy education that fosters individual accountability and rewards submission to the ought to be sociopolitical and economic structures. Adaptive rhetorics reject “the idea that citizens are communally responsible for pursuing a future less marked by structural inequality” (p. 42). Activist rhetorics, in contrast, recognize that literacy practices reflect unique cultural ecologies, equally respectable and valid, and believe in communal action to ignite change in literacy inequality. Activist rhetorics “construct the ought to be of a world in which formal schooling enables universally first-class citizenship” (p. 43) cutting across class and race boundaries.

Because he understands activism as a collective and unremitting enterprise, Feingenbaum emphasizes the need to collaboratively confront the “liberal-individualist ethics” (p. 59) invoked by adaptive rhetorics, and question the effect of individual activists, referred to as the archetype of the starfish saviors, who might deeply impact the lives of a handful of learners but do not address systemic oppression at its roots. The starfish story illustrates the heroic urban educator who believes in saving the world one student at a time without realizing that these actions avoid questions of community and might not consider the complexity of ecology.

Literacy in a Civil Rights Context

Historically, oppressive educational structures have undermined the identity, intellectual potential, and social and political participation of communities of color by means of enforced illiteracy. Using the framework of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, Feigenbaum offers in the second part of his book an in-depth examination of case studies of progressive literacy sponsorship inspired by the Highlander Folk School, established in 1932 by Myles Horton and Don West, to offer residential workshops that enabled local publics to identify issues of common concern and develop actions to address them. The author also extols the achievements of the Citizenship Schools and the Freedom Schools, practical literacy networks that nurtured collaborative imagination during the 1950s and 1960s across racially segregated states, and were influential in “destabilizing rigged citizenship while negotiating a complicated array of oppressive structures” (p. 83). Feigenbaum utilizes these examples of literacy in the context of civil rights to acknowledge the responsibilities associated with becoming literate and to emphasize that adults grow particularly motivated to learn when they see the direct application of knowledge to practical problems, develop skills instrumental to challenge the roles imposed upon them by society, and feel entitled to contest stories of crisis and build narratives for social change.

African-American communities have traditionally cultivated communalist achievement and communi-
ty-based literacy education as envisioned by Southern activists Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark, aimed primarily to teach black adults to read and write so they would qualify to vote, and ultimately to empower those oppressed to question dominant structures related to housing opportunities and political representation. As Feigenbaum illustrates in this part of the book, the enhancement of literacy skills beyond formal school settings equipped these struggling groups to advocate for state and federal legislation to ensure equal treatment of citizens and overthrow segregation, challenge the oppressive mission of sharecropper education, and demand justice for community leaders and volunteers committed to bringing the silenced voices to the political conversation. What lessons can be learned from the egalitarian pedagogies that led literacy development within the African-American Civil Rights Movement and nurtured problem-posing as a catalyst for political action? How can educators today engage with students and community partners in a critical analysis of historical parameters of discrimination and exclusion and cultivate effective public speaking and rhetorical performance to foster leadership and instill a sense of urgency around the need for change?

Feigenbaum’s approach to earning activism through literacy education is rooted in the strategy adopted by the Citizenship Schools and Freedom Schools to redefine illiteracy from a non-white perspective as an issue affecting the community as a whole and not merely the individual. Consequently, this enabled learners to earn activism as they became literate and rose “to visualize a future in which first-class citizenship would be universally recognized and to establish a communal process for realizing this world” (p. 87). Feigenbaum also draws on Dewey’s experience-based living curriculum (2011), critical to a model of moral imagination for service-learning, that focuses on overcoming illiteracy with a communalist approach and foregrounds the relationship between literacy and community action.

The Decay of Activist Rhetorics

Embracing egalitarianism, as conceived by activist Ella Baker, meant to act collaboratively to dismantle the adaptive rhetorics of school hierarchy, promote shared authority between learners and teachers, and support a cultural ecology of diversity and equality (Ransby, 2003). Models of adult literacy education such as Baker’s that pervade Feigenbaum’s educational philosophy were successful in hybridizing community and institutional structures and blending pragmatic and idealist leadership. However, they eventually experienced a rhetorical decay once their immediate goal was accomplished, and they failed to reimagine a future path to continue challenging the adaptive rhetorics of the time. Feigenbaum warns today’s progressives of “the dangers of success” (p. 98). He highlights the importance of reflecting unabatedly on the intentionality of literacy activism within a particular cultural ecology and the necessity of revisiting how understandings of literacy need to be uncolaced so that the achievement ideology inherent in adaptive rhetorics – “to-each-her-own” – that oppresses learners continues to be subverted (p. 111).

He examines contemporary networks commendable for reimagining practical literacy, such as the Algebra Project and its sister organization, the Young People’s Project, which are focused on supporting math and digital literacy, community building, and advocacy. The Algebra Project has worked since 1982 “to turn the teaching and learning of algebra from an insurmountable obstacle to a highway, to establish algebra into a tool to help expand the nation’s ‘We The People’ reach to include its children” (Moses, 2012). By promoting math literacy, these programs empower youth from underserved environments to succeed in a technology-based society and overcome some of the barriers to full citizenship.

Feigenbaum praises the commitment of these initiatives to prepare marginalized inner-city students to compete more fairly in our present cultural ecology of overwhelming standardized testing by “facilitating access to inquiry-based, experiential education [that] supports a virtuous circle in which education and activism reinforce each other” (p. 115). The author writes from the perspective of higher education and one could pose to him the question of how the achievements of these successful initiatives can be modeled in higher education.

Intentional Partnerships in Higher Education

In the third part of the book, Feigenbaum aspires to forge alliances between community partners and university scholars that would bring about systemic changes to literacy education. He fervently calls upon justice-oriented educators to re-earn literacy activism through research by pursuing community-engaged scholarship. This made me wonder how he envisions us, his colleagues across the humanities, resisting higher education curricular and financial constraints, overcoming the academic disdain toward engaged scholarship, and working collaboratively to establish partnerships across institutional and community boundaries so we can advocate for more equitable and sustainable power dynamics. I also wondered how the author would advise us in resolving the tensions inherent in campus-community partnerships. Traditionally, the engagement with communities by higher education institutions has lacked reciprocity;
universities struggle with sharing power and resources, its ‘organization-first approach’ hindering truly equal partnerships with their surrounding communities (Creighton & Harwood, 2007). Further, university leaders have failed to invest their respective institutions’ “vast but detached wealth [in the communities] to which they are home” (Guinan, McKinley, & Yi, 2013, p. 7).

Feigenbaum proposes to destabilize higher education’s academic responsibility gap by supporting a model of community literacy that promotes intercultural inquiry and engages in dialogue with individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds through “a process of invention that funnels the communal resources of culturally diverse groups toward intervening on issues of mutual interest” (p. 123). He firmly believes that community literacy praxes represent a progressive ought to be supported by the pillars of egalitarianism and reciprocity, and urges community literacy practitioners to pursue a research agenda that involves community voices in co-defining problems and co-appraising the potential and real benefits and risks of the developed projects for all partners. While Feigenbaum’s framework for analysis and action is robust and might undoubtedly appeal to seasoned engagement scholars, I believe that early career educators in the field of civic engagement would benefit from more specific guidelines regarding the implementation of the kind of research and practice agenda that the author idealistically outlines.

### A Case Study of Community Literacy Partnership

Having engaged in local and international community literacy partnerships himself, Feigenbaum argues that applying a synthesis of strategies prevents the exploitation of the community to advance academic interest and challenges assumptions about “who serves and who is served” (p. 128). He revisits the importance of entering a community with a sense of consciousness and humility to negotiate collectively and sensibly the struggle against literacy adaptation – ideas explored in his earlier work, “Challenging Rhetorics of Adaptation through Creative Mal-adjustment” (2012), an analysis of student discourse on “a pedagogy of creative maladjustment … to make rhetorics of adaptation overt, thus helping students become more conscious of the civic implications of language.”

Activist educators provide higher education learners with opportunities to experience first-hand the cultural diversity of our world and demonstrate a commitment to challenge preconceptions based on monolingual and monocultural narratives so as to critically examine the impact that global dynamics are having in local cultures as well as to help students grow as civically engaged citizens (Alonso García & Longo, 2015).

Feigenbaum, building upon previous chapters where we learned about his literacy activism approach challenging adaptive rhetorics and historical models of literacy that aimed to ensure literacy for all, analyzes in the third part of his book his direct involvement in reimagining literacy activism within the context of a Miami-based nonprofit, Imagination Federation. The organization “seeks to collaboratively imagine a world in which the totality of human society lives sustainably in regard to both human-made and natural structures” (p. 150), and promotes education in impoverished communities. The organization is committed to supporting Earth-literacy narratives that favor connectivity among human and natural species through sustainable living rather than societal and environmental disengagement through excessive consumerism. As the author describes, Imagination Federation works across borders in Chacraseca, Nicaragua, supporting community efforts to enhance educational opportunities for the local youth, and advocates for sustainable partnerships that ensure long-term cooperation. Imagination Federation founders believe in the organic nature of relationships, and the organization’s paramount program, Tengo un sueño (I have a dream), originated from informal conversations with educators in the community and a shared commitment to “an education that honors human potential” (p. 155). Through this program, Imagination Federation sponsors 34 Chacraseca children to pursue educational endeavors from kindergarten to college, ensuring that they receive adequate teachers’ guidance and support to graduate. Led by progressive college educators and engaged scholars, the nonprofit is constantly reimagining reciprocity, the contexts of collective deliberation, the boundaries between community and university, and “the one-and-done structure of most college courses” (p. 162) that interfere with long-term student civic engagement.

Imagination Federation engages learners from Miami Dade Community College in transformative journeys toward activism through service and leadership that challenge the adaptive paradigm in higher education, foster collaborative engagement, and endorse a more sustainable institutional culture where the primary functions would be to provide instruction to those who teach others and to “create environments and experiences that allow students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves and to become members of communities of learning that make discoveries and solve problems” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 15). Feigenbaum encourages progressive educators to treat students as reciprocal partners, to trust their voices and stories, to practice creative waiting by recog-
nizing “students’ potential for challenging adaptive rhetorics in the long run … and overcome the sway of adaptation on their professional and civic choices” (p. 162). Perhaps the author could have described the transformational impact of these types of three-fold partnerships among faculty, students, and community partners from the perspective of students, to whom he is unwaveringly committed, and have given students more voice in this book.

Journeys toward Activism

_Collaborative Imagination_ illustrates the empowering nature of literacy through a compelling collection of stories that unveil the urgency to restore health in the education system and illuminate the path for meaningful collaborations among communities and higher education institutions that have the potential to expand learners’ imaginations to grow as responsible citizens committed to sustainable first-class citizenship for all.

Feigenbaum’s work is inspired by his earnest commitment to nurture community literacy as a liberatory rhetorical practice for inquiry and social change. He draws eloquent arguments in support of progressive praxes of literacy sponsorship that resist the adaptive rhetorics of mainstream education, and offers a valuable framework for analysis so we can understand how discursive struggles related to the _is, was and ought to be_ have operated in historical and contemporary societies. Feigenbaum inspires social-justice educators to pursue activism as a long-life endeavor, be persistently conscious of the changes in cultural ecologies, and to consistently reflect on matters concerning hierarchy and reciprocity in partnerships. By doing so, he argues, together we can imagine approaches that confront power imbalances that can hinder the real intentionality of activism.

This is a book that literacy education advocates will find highly relevant to our practices. It is a compelling resource for faculty, students, and community partners to ponder literacy education issues and reflect collectively on Feigenbaum’s concluding question: How can we embark on educational journeys toward activism and, despite the circumstances of our cultural ecology, cultivate a collaborative imagination to enable systematic, structural change?

Notes

1. Horton (2003) believed in education for action, and advocated for a leadership model grounded in community and supported by teaching people to train others.

2. Laubach’s teaching philosophy (1947/2013), based on the notion of each one teach one, nurtures the idea that if you can read, you can teach another person to read, and it is the people’s responsibility to do so in order to support the public and practical nature of literacy.


References


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