

Book Review *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History* by Mara Holt

Amanda Hayes Kent State University Tuscarawas

The first class I ever took as an undergrad with Dr. Mara Holt was titled “Women’s Rhetorics.” I barely knew what rhetorics were (testing out of first-year composition via the AP exam was a mixed blessing for someone who became an English major), and I certainly didn’t know what the word “pedagogy” meant. The first readings in Dr. Holt’s course—Nancy Schniedewind’s “Teaching Feminist Process” and Carolyn Shrewsbury’s “What Is Feminist Pedagogy”—left me a little blindsided. Not only did both address concepts that felt above my understanding, but what I could make out focused on teaching—something that seemed, from my inadequate understanding, as distinct from the focus of the class. (The teacher might be interested in articles like these, I thought, but why would the students be?) This reaction is the almost textbook response of a student who had, until then, been inculcated in the traditional power dynamics of a teacher-focused educational system. Only gradually would I come to understand how different, and important, it was that Dr. Holt was making clear her own pedagogical influences and opening these up for discussion.

Reading Dr. Holt’s book, *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History* is for me something like a visit with an old friend, the depth of whose knowledge and experience continues to fascinate me. Having the privilege of Dr. Holt’s academic mentorship in my undergrad and graduate studies, I had heard some of these stories, but far more were new and, as I expected, deeply insightful into where the field of composition studies stands and how it came to be there.

Collaborative learning has, as Holt notes, become pedagogically mainstream, and Holt is perfectly positioned to show us how this came to be. Her pedagogical training with Kenneth Bruffee, at the Brooklyn College Institute in Peer Tutor Training and Collaborative Learning in the 1980s, brought her in on the ground floor of the modern wave of collaborative pedagogy alongside figures such as Carol Stanger and John Trimbur. She went on to complete her PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, site of the first networked computer classrooms. However, as Holt notes, this is all fairly recent history. What is missing is a field-wide understanding of collaborative learning’s roots. Because of this, collaborative pedagogy’s “achievements have not built upon one another, but rather have emerged intermittently in the literature with the self-consciousness of repetitive spontaneous innovations” (3). Instructors, when faced with the challenges of shaping democratic learning environments, haven’t been able to build upon past innovations; instead, the “series of parallel innovations” of collaborative pedagogy throughout the field’s history have been treated as “brand-new problems, and they renew the cyclical process of reinventing the wheel” (5). Holt’s history can help us build upon and learn from this past, specifically in how it demonstrates the links between the composition teacher’s intentions, their theories of writing and democracy, and wider historical/ideological situations in the nation at large.

As the book is primarily historical, the organization is largely chronological. While chapter 1 established the book's context and purpose, Chapter 2 roots us in the Depression-era 1930s, which saw collaborative learning's first flowering under John Dewey. Holt argues that Dewey's contributions to collaborative learning, specifically in the correlations between education and participatory democracy, have been too little recognized. However, they present the origin of a pattern that repeats up until the modern day: collaborative practices are continually shaped in response to social, political, and educational dynamics threatening participatory democracy. Dewey argued that educational practices could in fact reform society, an ideology that influenced his perceptions of what collaboration in the classroom should look like and achieve. However, social changes resulting from World War II and the instigation of the Cold War, as well as educational changes following the flood of baby boom students into college classrooms, spurred a rejection of Dewey's methods. While collaborative practice wasn't abandoned, it functioned in ways that were antithetical to Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of democratized, socially integrated classrooms: traditional hierarchies and teacher authority became reinscribed, not challenged, by student group work.

Because Dewey's experiences in the 1930s were largely forgotten or ignored, when the field of rhetoric and composition began to emerge more strongly in the '60s and '70s, it had few precedents on which to build. However, the ensuing resurgence of interest in education as participatory democracy in these decades made collaborative pedagogy an attractive prospect. In Chapter 3, Holt examines the published literature of the era and discerns two forms of collaborative pedagogy that emerged in writing classrooms: antiestablishment pedagogy and writing support pedagogy. Both forms grappled with questions of teacher authority and student roles in a collaborative learning environment, alongside questions about the very teachability of writing. From these debates emerged three major figures that would go on shape the field in significant ways: Peter Elbow, Kenneth Bruffee, and Ira Shor.

Chapter 4 examines how Elbow, Bruffee, and Shor reintegrated Dewey's philosophies into discussions of collaborative learning. Holt considers each figure alongside his contemporary and ensuing critics, a tactic that allows for a fuller sense of how each has influenced our current pedagogical and classroom contexts. This chapter also sees a flowering of my favorite aspect of this book: the glimpses we are given into Holt's own experiences with the people and ideas she's describing. For example, she explores how her experience with Peter Elbow and the Brooklyn Institute inspired her own writing:

[John] Trimbur suggested I look at my own writing process to discover whether I used Elbow's practices. In fact, the only way I finished my dissertation was to start freewriting. . . . Thanks to Elbow's role in the Brooklyn Institute, my own collaborative practices are balanced in a reciprocal interaction between the individual and the group—however their definitions are constantly revised. (61)

These insights into Holt's own experience and thought process bring a personalism to this project that many histories lack. Rather than feeling like name dropping for its own sake, reading these sections feel like we're getting a ground floor view of the field as it evolved, directly from one of the people forming it.

Chapter 5 moves away from a strictly chronological organization and into a focus on collaborative pedagogy's interactions with feminist theory. Within the chapter itself, we move from the influential works of Schniedewind and Shrewsbury in the 1980s up through the current day, in order to understand how feminist methodologies have shaped—and called into question—accepted tenets of collaborative learning. For example, collaborative pedagogy's desire to decenter teach authority reads very differently when those teachers are already marginalized, an argument broached by feminists of color such as Allison Dorsey. Alongside these necessary interventions, however, Holt argues that these scholars share Dewey's interest in collaborative education as a methodology by which to reform society in progressive ways. This shared interest makes seeing their linked pedagogical history even more potentially valuable.

Chapters 6 and 7 likewise each move from collaborative pedagogy's past and into its present to consider its wider influences in the field—influences that are not always recognized or acknowledged. Specifically, Holt shows that collaborative pedagogy has been essential in the development of writing center theory (chapter 6) and computer-mediated writing (chapter 7). As before, Holt unearths a pattern in which collaborative pedagogy shapes these aspects of the field but is likewise shaped by them in significant ways. However, a lacking sense of this shared history has inhibited each from fully benefiting from collaborative pedagogy's affordances. As Holt notes in her conclusion, "Collaborative learning in the past ninety years has been 'discovered' at least six times, twice since I started the research that culminated in this book" (126).

Knowing our history is always important. But knowing the historical linkages between collaboration, education, writing, and democracy are becoming increasingly necessary to rhetoric and composition as a field. It is these linkages that put us on the frontlines of social change, especially now as we see increasing attacks on our democracy and ever-increasing threats to the survival of the humanities and writing classrooms within our own institutions. Throughout her book, Holt shows what is at stake in the success or failure of collaborative classrooms as agents of participatory democracy. It is an argument, and a history, that has rarely mattered more.

WORKS CITED

Holt, Mara. *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History*. CCCC/NCTE Studies in Writing and Rhetoric, 2018.

Schniedewind, Nancy. "Teaching Feminist Process." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 3/4, 1987, pp. 15-31.

Shrewsbury, Carolyn M. "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 3/4, 1987, pp. 6-14.